

The Broadway Musical in the Age of Mass Incarceration

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Abstract

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This dissertation examines the theme of incarceration in the Broadway musicals of the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, a period during which America was haunted by the specter of violent crime and how to combat it. During the last two decades of the twentieth century, a series of bipartisan crime bills passed by congress and signed by presidents Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush led to an unprecedented spike in incarceration rates in the United States, a plague that disproportionately affected Black and Latino Americans. In this same period, Broadway musicals often depicted scenes of incarceration, with some musicals set entirely within the confines of a prison cell. In these musicals, characters (almost always white) perform musical numbers—impassioned ballads, duets with love interests, or lively dance numbers—behind bars. These prison scenes and plotlines mirror scenes in contemporaneous American films and television responding to an American political culture obsessed with crime and punishment.

During the 1980s, the War on Drugs, fueled by right-wing religious conservatism, coincided with the rise of megamusicals aimed at tourists featuring heroic men of faith at odds with the law, as in *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* and *Les Misérables* (Chapter 1). In the 1990s, in the midst of simultaneous moral panics over the specter of child sexual abuse and the HIV/AIDS crisis, director Hal Prince mounted “serious” new musical dramas where the lead male protagonist is jailed for alleged child sexual abuse: *Kiss of the Spider Woman* and *Parade* (Chapter 2). By the early 2000s, Broadway audiences disillusioned with American politics were desperate for comedic, satirical critiques of the American criminal justice system, as reflected in the commercial success of musicals such as *The Producers* and *Urinetown*, shows that became even more relevant in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Chapter 3).

Despite the ubiquity of prison scenes in contemporary musicals, scholars have yet to draw this connection to these contemporaneous American political issues. Scholarship on the musicals of the late twentieth century is still a burgeoning field, and my work introduces an important cultural lens through which to view these works. Further, my research contributes to an ongoing national reckoning with the legacy of racism, policing, and mass incarceration in the United States. The Broadway musical has long been heralded as a distinct, uniquely American art form, reflecting American society and values. As such, I argue that the ubiquity of crime, policing, and incarceration in American culture has therefore enshrined those topics as fixtures of the musical genre.

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house I repeatedly viewed VHS tapes of *The Sound of Music*, *The King and I*, and *The Wizard of Oz* while growing up. I know how proud she would be to see me achieve this milestone. I thank the many friends and collaborators I have worked with on musicals and chatted with for hours about its many riches, especially Lexi Barnett. Finally, I want to thank Molly McCafferty, who probably could have written this dissertation without doing any research and may enjoy reading it the most out of anyone. This one's for you.

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Introduction

In the summer of 2020, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, I—like so many other white Americans troubled by the death of George Floyd and the surging Black Lives Matter movement—joined a group of friends to form an antiracist book club that met over Zoom. One of the first books we read was Michelle Alexander’s 2010 monograph *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, which had just been reissued as a tenth anniversary edition. Despite being published a decade prior and my knowing it was a highly impactful and influential book, it had fallen into the insurmountably large category of “books I know I should read eventually but have not yet found the time.” With nothing *but* time during the COVID-19 lockdown, and the book topping the lists of “Books Every White Person Should Read Right Now” flooding my social media feed, there was no better time to jump in. As I worked my way through Alexander’s book, I learned that the United States has the highest incarceration rate of any nation in the world.¹ I learned that between 1980 and 2000, the number of incarcerated people in the United States grew from roughly 300,000 to more than two million. I learned that this boom in incarceration was the result of a series of legislative actions over several presidential administrations, both Republican and Democrat. Yet, while digesting this dark and alarming history of incarceration in late twentieth-century America, I could not help but draw connections to my own field of study: Broadway musicals.

It was also during the COVID lockdown that I watched Mel Brooks’s *The Producers* for the first time—not the original 1967 film, but the 2005 film adaptation of the 2001 Broadway musical. Again, with an abundance of time on my hands and an inkling that I would be planning

¹ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, 10th anniversary ed. (New York: New Press, 2020), 7.

to write a dissertation on a musical theater topic, it seemed like a good time to fill in some of the gaps in my knowledge. When I reached Max's over-the-top eleven o'clock number "Betrayed," sung from his jail cell as he awaits trial, I realized that the humor of that song, like most of the jokes in *The Producers*, relies on a long-standing trope in the history of Broadway musicals: the prison scene. The immediate reference to "Close Every Door" from *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* was obvious, but I quickly began thinking of many other examples of scenes from musicals where characters are arrested, jailed, and/or tried in a courtroom. Armed with the knowledge presented in Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*, the idea for a dissertation—and inspiration for its title—was born.

My dissertation examines the theme of incarceration in the Broadway musicals of the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s. In the late twentieth century, American culture was haunted by the specter of violent crime and desperate to combat it. After the War on Drugs was declared by Richard Nixon in the 1970s, a series of bipartisan crime bills passed by congress and signed by presidents Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush led to an unprecedented spike in incarceration rates in the United States, a plague that disproportionately affected Black and Latino Americans.

During this same period, Broadway musicals often depicted scenes of incarceration, with some musicals set entirely within the confines of a prison cell. In these musicals, characters perform musical numbers—impassioned ballads, duets with love interests, or lively dance numbers—behind bars. These prison scenes, as well as those of police arrests or courtroom trials, are extremely common in contemporary musicals, mirroring scenes in contemporaneous American films and television, such as in the unprecedentedly successful *Law & Order* franchise or even the short-lived television musical series *Cop Rock*. Yet scholars have yet to draw these

connections. Research on musicals, particularly those from the late twentieth century, is still a burgeoning field, and my work introduces an important cultural lens through which to interpret these works. Further, my research contributes to an ongoing national reckoning with the legacy of racism, policing, and mass incarceration in the United States. The Broadway musical has long been heralded as a distinct, uniquely American art form. As such, I argue that the ubiquity of crime, policing, and incarceration in American culture has therefore enshrined those topics as fixtures of the musical genre.

Crime and Incarceration in Broadway Musicals: Early Examples

While this project looks specifically at musicals from the late twentieth century, the legacy of incarceration extends back to some of the earliest examples of the form, including opera. Rudolf Denk and Monika Fludernik have traced the legacy of prison in both serious operas—such as Beethoven’s *Fidelio* (1814) and Puccini’s *Tosca* (1900)—and comedic takes from John Gay’s *Beggar’s Opera* (1728) to its modern progeny, Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill’s *Die Dreigroschenoper* (*The Threepenny Opera*, 1928).² Denk and Fludernik contrast Baroque-era approaches to prison scenes with Romantic and post-Romantic opera. In the Baroque period, tragic or hopeless prison scenes were inevitably lightened by *lieto fine* convention that required a happy ending for the hero or heroine, usually achieved through divine intervention (*deus ex machina*). Prison scenes in later Romantic and post-Romantic operas by Beethoven, Verdi, and Puccini “[decry] the social injustices that have resulted in the hero’s incarceration” and “enhance the emotional impact on the audience, who are not given any respite from their feelings of

² Rudolf Denk and Monika Fludernik, “Operatic Prisons: Carcerality on the Stage and in Music,” *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 47, no. 3 (September 2020): 271–303.

sympathetic horror.”³ Scholars have read Beethoven’s *Fidelio* as a political text expressing republican views later championed in the Enlightenment and French Revolution.⁴ Others have shown how modern productions of *Fidelio* and other prison operas strike contemporary audiences in different ways given the political landscape of the twentieth century. In the mid-1980s, in the middle of the Reagan administration, Gary Schmidgall asked, “Is *Fidelio* the Saddest Opera?,” noting how “political imprisonment and torture now cast far longer shadows than they did in Beethoven’s time.”⁵ Recent productions reimagined as prison operas in their setting or performed for—or sometimes *with*—actual prison inmates have brought even more attention to the connections between the two.⁶

Even before the first integrated book musicals of the 1940s, musical comedies of the early twentieth century highlighted crime and incarceration, yet scholars have not specifically homed in on this theme, particularly as it relates to American culture and politics. In Cole Porter’s *Anything Goes* (1934), an incompetent but disguised gangster on the run deceives the naïve banker Billy Crocker into assuming the identity of “Snake Eyes” Johnson, Public Enemy No. 1. When the true identities of both men are revealed, they are put in a holding cell aboard the

³ Denk and Fludernik, “Operatic Prisons,” 273.

⁴ John Bokina, “Opera and Republican Virtue: Beethoven’s *Fidelio*,” *International Political Science Review* 12, no. 2 (1991): 101–116.

⁵ Gary Schmidgall, “Is *Fidelio* the Saddest Opera?” *Opera News* 48, no. 8 (1984): 16.

⁶ Ryan Ebright, “Beethoven’s 200-Year-Old *Fidelio* Enters Today’s Prisons,” *New York Times*, May 4, 2018; Naomi André discusses a production of *Carmen* produced by Opera MODO set in a women’s prison in the conclusion to *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018); The Metropolitan Opera’s production of Jake Heggie and Terrance McNally’s *Dead Man Walking* was performed with the inmates at Sing Sing prison in 2023. See Javier C. Hernández, “A Death Row Opera Goes to Sing Sing, With Inmates Onstage,” *New York Times*, October 4, 2023; and, Paul Elie, “*Dead Man Walking* at Sing Sing,” *New Yorker*, September 28, 2023.

ship before being pardoned by the U.S. government. In Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock* (1937), all the main characters are arrested in the opening scene and thrown into a night court jail together, while rest of the musical's action occurs as flashbacks. *Man of La Mancha* (1965), a musical adaptation of Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, imagines the entirety of the action as being performed in Cervantes's prison cell during the Spanish Inquisition, with the other prisoners acting out the story. Composer John Kander and lyricist Fred Ebb have returned to prison as a theme throughout their works. In addition to *Kiss of the Spider Woman* explored in detail in this project, their 1975 musical *Chicago* tells the story of women accused of murder, who await their trials in a women's prison. While these prison musicals are some of the more salient examples, this is by no means an exhaustive list; there are numerous other examples from musicals throughout the first three-quarters of the twentieth century where characters are arrested, jailed, or otherwise at odds with the law.

Yet scholars who have looked at the aforementioned works have focused on other aspects of their historical relevance rather than their relationship to the politics of crime, policing, and incarceration. Carol Oja looked at the influence of the 1930s mass song on the musical score of *The Cradle Will Rock*, while Trudi Wright has considered the larger implications of state sponsored arts and censorship in Marc Blitzstein's subsequent work.⁷ *Man of La Mancha* has recently been considered as an example of musicals dealing with mental illness by musicologist

⁷ Carol J. Oja, "Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock* and Mass-Song Style of the 1930s," *Musical Quarterly* 73, no. 4 (1989): 445–75. Trudi Wright, "Lost in The Cradle: The Reconstruction and Meaning of Marc Blitzstein's *FTP Plowed Under* (1937)," *American Music* 34, no. 3 (2016): 344–64.

Raymond Knapp.⁸ Ethan Mordden’s book on *Chicago* mostly traces the long history of dramatizing the story, including a play and silent film before the musical.⁹ His final chapter does situate the 1990s revival of the musical in the context of the O. J. Simpson trial, and has served as an inspiration for this dissertation’s exploration of new and original musicals during the late twentieth century, the period during which American incarceration saw its most precipitous rise. This dissertation illuminates a heretofore unexplored theme in the history of Broadway musicals while adding to a still burgeoning subfield of musical theater scholarship looking at more contemporary musicals.

Literature Review: Musical Theater Since 1980

Scholarship on the Broadway musical is still a relatively new field, one that only really began in earnest in the 1990s. In the introduction to his seminal 1997 book *Enchanted Evenings*, musicologist Geoffrey Block notes how most work on Broadway musicals before the 1990s came from theater historians and critics, and that “the musicological community studiously ignored the Broadway terrain.”¹⁰ He explains how some books published by music scholars like

⁸ Raymond Knapp and Zelda Knapp, “Musicals and the Envoicing of Mental Illness and Madness: From *Lady in the Dark* to *Man of La Mancha* (and Beyond),” *Journal of Interdisciplinary Voice Studies* 4, no. 2 (2019): 209–23; Raymond Knapp and Zelda Knapp, “*Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* and the Trajectories of Mental Illness in Musicals,” *Music and the Moving Image* 13, no. 3 (2020): 5–14.

⁹ Ethan Mordden, *All That Jazz: The Life and Times of the Musical Chicago* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

¹⁰ Geoffrey Block, *Enchanted Evenings: The Broadway Musical from Show Boat to Sondheim and Lloyd Webber*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), xiii. The first edition was published in 1997 and represented one of the

Joseph Swain¹¹ and Stephen Banfield¹² in the early 1990s, along with his book, paved the way for others in the field. These early explorations by musicologists and music theorists sought to legitimize the form as sophisticated enough to warrant the attention of music scholars, and were thus largely focused on technical analyses of the music itself and the biographies of the composers and lyricists rather than the social or political context or implication of the works.

As more studies proliferated in the years that followed, they continued to focus primarily on the early years of the musical, what has been problematically referred to as Broadway's "Golden Age." Geoffrey Block served as editor for the Broadway Masters Series (Yale University Press, 2003–2011) and then Broadway Legacies Series (Oxford University Press, from 2010), which have published dozens of book-length studies on shows and composers from the early-to-mid-twentieth century. Most monographs are dedicated to either a single composer (George Gershwin, Richard Rodgers, Jerome Kern, Frank Loesser, Irving Berlin, Leonard Bernstein) or single musical (*South Pacific*, *My Fair Lady*, *Show Boat*, *Pal Joey*, *Oklahoma!*), laying foundational biographical and historical groundwork and documenting the trajectories of composers' careers and shows' paths to the Broadway stage.

The New Musicology has pushed scholars to consider culture and identity as key to the understanding of music, including the Broadway musical. In the early 2000s, Raymond Knapp explored (American) national and personal identity in two separate studies of the Broadway

¹¹ Joseph P. Swain, *The Broadway Musical: A Critical and Musical Survey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). A second "revised and expanded" edition was published in 2002 by Scarecrow Press.

¹² Stephen Banfield, *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993).

musical that included some more recent shows.¹³ Knapp looks at the ways the musical has depicted what and who is America, as well as how the musical explores topics such as gender and relationships. Theater scholar John Bush Jones situates the musical in its contemporary social context in *Our Musicals, Ourselves* (2003).¹⁴ Working chronologically, Jones explores musicals that represent their broader sociocultural milieu. Though he does not consider mass incarceration, Jones's approach is highly influential in my own interpretation of the Broadway musical as reflective of the centrality of the carceral system in American culture.

Other scholars have taken up narrow topics and themes in their approach to the history of Broadway. Stacy Wolf's *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* (2011) considers the way musicals have reflected American attitudes toward gender and sexuality throughout the second half of the twentieth century.¹⁵ Andrea Most has explored the relationship between Jews and the Broadway musical,¹⁶ while John Clum has looked at it from the perspective of gay men.¹⁷ More recently, Jake Johnson has explored the unique position of the musical within the Mormon community.¹⁸ Elissa Harbert is interested in how musicals engage with historical subjects and deal with the problems of historicity, along with how

¹³ Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005) and *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

¹⁴ John Bush Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theater* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2003).

¹⁵ Stacy Wolf, *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹⁶ Andrea Most, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

¹⁷ John Clum, *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).

¹⁸ Jake Johnson, *Mormons, Musical Theater, and Belonging in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019).

contemporary politics influence the reception of a musical over time.¹⁹ Similarly, Elizabeth Craft has published on how race and politics affect the reception of recent Broadway musicals by Lin-Manuel Miranda.²⁰ The approaches of Harbert and Craft serve as models for my own approach to the 1980s and 1990s.

The musical theater genre now boasts scholarly handbooks and companions from Oxford, Cambridge, and Routledge. Interest in musicals has gathered steam across the English-speaking world, including in the United Kingdom, as they have played a significant role as both importer and exporter of musicals throughout its history. In 2006, British musicologists Dominic Symonds and George Burrows hosted the first annual Song, Stage, and Screen conference at the University of Portsmouth. In the same year, they also established *Studies in Musical Theatre*, the first interdisciplinary, peer-reviewed journal dedicated to the topic. From its inception, the journal has cast a wide net, with its inaugural volume containing articles covering productions from Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* to *Billy Elliot: The Musical*. The journal and conference were joined together under the umbrella of The International Society for the Study of Musicals in 2023.

In the last two decades, scholarship on the contemporary Broadway musical (after 1970) has begun to expand, spearheaded largely by musicologists Jessica Sternfeld and Elizabeth Wollman. Sternfeld's monograph *The Megamusical* (2006) was the first in-depth study of the grandiose musicals of the 1980s and 90s, united by their through-composed scores, epic

¹⁹ Elissa Harbert, "'Ever to the Right?': The Political Life of *1776* in the Nixon Era," *American Music* 35, no. 2 (2017): 237–70; "Hamilton and History Musicals," *American Music* 36, no. 4 (2018): 412–28.

²⁰ Elizabeth Titrington Craft, "Headfirst into an Abyss: The Politics and Political Reception of *Hamilton*," *American Music* 36, no. 4 (2018): 429–47; "Can We 'Leave Behind the World We Know?': Exploring Race and Ethnicity in the Musicals of Lin-Manuel Miranda," in *The Routledge Companion to the Contemporary Musical*, ed. Jessica Sternfeld and Elizabeth Wollman, 216–25 (New York: Routledge, 2020).

narratives, spectacular production values, and savvy marketing schemes.²¹ In the same year, Elizabeth Wollman published *The Theater Will Rock*, examining the history of the rock musical from the 1960s to the new millennium.²² Together, Sternfeld and Wollman jointly authored a chapter called “After the ‘Golden Age’” for *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical* (2011), probing the problematic yet lasting moniker for the period of Broadway musicals around the mid-twentieth century and exploring more recent trends.²³ Their chapter details the aesthetic and economic transformations the musical has undergone since the 1980s. Recently, the two co-edited *The Routledge Guide to the Contemporary Musical* (2020), with contributions from more than forty scholars, firmly carving out a separate space for research on musicals of the last fifty years.²⁴ This expansive and much-needed volume probes the considers the musicals of the last half-century from a variety of disciplinary perspectives and lenses, including technology, gender, race, dance, digital media, and the global reception of musicals. Even still, the impact of the American mass incarceration epidemic on the inception and reception of new Broadway musicals remains unexplored.

Despite growing interest among scholars in contemporary musicals along with their political and cultural meaning, scholars have not considered the Broadway musical in relation to the War on Drugs and the American mass incarceration epidemic. This dissertation fills a

²¹ Jessica Sternfeld, *The Megamusical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

²² Elizabeth L. Wollman, *The Theater Will Rock: A History of the Rock Musical, from Hair to Hedwig* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006).

²³ Jessica Sternfeld and Elizabeth L. Wollman, “After the ‘Golden Age,’” in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*, Raymond Knapp, Mitchell Morris, and Stacy Wolf, eds., 111–124 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

²⁴ Jessica Sternfeld and Elizabeth L. Wollman, eds., *The Routledge Companion to the Contemporary Musical* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

significant gap in the literature by showing how six musicals that appeared on Broadway for the first time between 1980 and 2001 responded to an era in which crime, policing, and incarceration were inescapable topics. The musicals covered in the present study have received limited scholarly coverage, though there have been some crucial initial contributions. Sternfeld's aforementioned survey of the megamusical is a foundational study of the musicals I consider from the 1980s (*Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* and *Les Misérables*). James Leve's book on Kander and Ebb's musicals is an invaluable jumping off point for my critical inquiry of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, along with John Clum's reading of the piece as a diva musical.²⁵ Stacy Wolf has considered *Parade* as part of her overview of the 1990s, but focuses primarily on the character of Leo Frank's wife, Lucille.²⁶ *The Producers* has received scant musicological coverage, though it is nearly always cited in historical surveys for its unprecedented success as a return to musical comedy after the "serious" musicals of the 1990s, and as an example of the "movical" (musicals based on popular films, often cited as a late-twentieth-century and twenty-first-century phenomenon).²⁷ *The Producers* has also been examined as part of scholarly readings of its creators Mel Brooks and Susan Stroman.²⁸

²⁵ James Leve, *Kander and Ebb* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). John Clum, *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).

²⁶ Stacy Wolf, *Changed for Good*, 167–174.

²⁷ See Larry Stempel, *Showtime: A History of the Broadway Musical Theater* (New York: Norton, 2010); Nathan Hurwitz, *A History of the American Musical Theatre: No Business Like It* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

²⁸ Alex Symonds, *Mel Brooks in the Cultural Industries: Survival and Prolonged Adaptation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012); Patrick McGilligan, *Funny Man: Mel Brooks* (New York: Harper, 2019); Jeremy Dauber, *Mel Brooks: Disobedient Jew* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023); Samuel Boerboom and Beth E. Bonnsetter, *The Political Mel Brooks* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019). Regarding Susan Stroman, see Mary Jo Lodge, "The Rise of the Female Director/Choreographer on Broadway," in *Women in American Musical Theatre*, edited by Bud Coleman and Judith Sebesta, 221–43 (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008).

Urinetown is perhaps the most under-researched musical I plan to examine, though John Bush Jones devotes the last couple of pages of *Our Musicals, Ourselves* to considering how it represents a way forward for musicals in the new millennium. The show has even drawn the attention of economists.²⁹ Thus, this dissertation is the largely the result of significant primary research and original analysis, coupled with secondary sources drawn mainly from theater criticism in print news media.

Literature Review: Mass Incarceration

My project drew initial inspiration (including the formation of its title) from Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. Published in 2010, Alexander's book exposes the racial inequities within the American criminal justice system, where seemingly race-neutral policies enacted in the late twentieth century have had an outsized impact on communities of color, particularly Black men. Politicians were judged on whether they were "tough on crime" and promoted "law and order." The War on Drugs, dating back to the Nixon era, gained momentum during the Reagan administration with the help of the Comprehensive Crime Control Act of 1984, which established federal mandatory minimum sentences and abolished federal parole. The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, signed into law by Bill Clinton in 1994, established three-strikes life sentences and fueled the mass incarceration epidemic in the United States that would extend to the present day, disproportionately affecting Black and Latino Americans.

Alexander's book brought the issue of mass incarceration to the public eye, and sparked a wave of academic scholarship on the topic. Since 2010, numerous monographs by university

²⁹ Matthew Rousu, *Broadway and Economics: Economic Lessons from Show Tunes* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

presses have been published on incarceration, including Todd Clear and Natasha Frost's *The Punishment Imperative: The Rise and Failure of Mass Incarceration in America* (2014), Keramet Reiter's *Mass Incarceration* (2018), Franklin Zimring's *The Insidious Momentum of American Mass Incarceration* (2020). Other scholars have focused, in particular, on the role of the executive and judiciary branches in contributing to and upholding mass incarceration, such as Linda Mancillas's *Presidents and Mass Incarceration: Choices at the Top, Repercussions at the Bottom* (2018) and William Pizzi's *The Supreme Court's Role in Mass Incarceration* (2020).

Scholars have recently begun to consider the way that incarceration is represented in the media, though they have not yet considered the Broadway musical. *The Palgrave Handbook of Incarceration in Popular Culture* (2020) covers a broad range of media types, including film, documentary, television drama, reality tv, podcasts, memoir, and even erotica, but does not consider musical theater.³⁰ Most studies have focused exclusively on film and television, such as David Wilson's *Images of Incarceration*.³¹ Lee Flamand's *American Mass Incarceration and Post-Network Quality Television* has considered recent portrayals since the advent of streaming services creating original television content.³² One of the most prominent examples is Netflix's *Orange Is the New Black*, which is the subject of the edited collection *Caged Women: Incarceration, Representation, and Media*.³³ It is interesting to note that most of these studies are

³⁰ Marcus Harmes, Meredith Harmes, and Barbara Harmes, *The Palgrave Handbook of Incarceration in Popular Culture* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

³¹ David Wilson, *Images of Incarceration: Representations of Prison in Film and Television Drama* (Winchester, UK: Waterside Press, 2004).

³² Lee Flamand, *American Mass Incarceration and Post-Network Quality Television: Captivating Aspirations* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022).

³³ Shirley A. Jackson and Laurie L. Gordy, eds., *Caged Women: Incarceration, Representation, and Media* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

published outside the United States. It is possible this is also why these media scholars have overlooked the Broadway musical, as it has less of an international presence.

Research Methods

In addition to careful intertextual reading of the existing secondary literature on this era of Broadway history and these musicals (mentioned above), my dissertation is supported by the following methodologies:

Score and Stage Analysis: As a musicologist, my interest in the Broadway musical is the way that music, text, and theater combine to tell a story. While the mere plot of these musicals is often enough to place them within the broader cultural moment I am exploring throughout my dissertation, I am chiefly interested in the decisions of the composer and lyricist to dramatize the story in a musical way. Analysis of the music itself (tempo, rhythm, key, melodic contour, tessitura,) and its relationship to the text can help reveal composers' disposition toward the dramatic narrative and suggest their intent for the audience. Yet, as I am dealing with stage works, it is also necessary to examine the various other production elements (sets, costumes, lighting, etc.) and the way they highlight and emphasize certain themes in the piece. This requires looking at production photographs and recordings, which exist almost exclusively in archives (see below).

Archival Research: Primary sources are integral to my dissertation project and key to understanding the motivations of the creatives during the gestation process for these musicals. The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center is the largest repository for primary sources related to the Broadway musical. The Theatre on Film and Tape archive at the Billy Rose Theatre Division contains archival audio and video recordings of most Broadway

musicals, sometimes including television commercials (key to understanding how these musicals were marketed to the public), rehearsal footage, and interviews with members of the creative team. The library also holds miscellaneous documents such as playbills and posters, along with written notes and papers related to the musical. Some Broadway artists have made their complete collections of archival materials available for research purposes, including key figures involved in the works covered by my dissertation, namely Fred Ebb (lyricist for *Kiss of the Spider Woman*) and Harold Prince (director for *Kiss of the Spider Woman* and *Parade*).

Published Reviews: Journalistic criticism and coverage of musicals provides an invaluable snapshot in time, showing how the American public responded to musicals at their debut. As many of these musicals have gone on to greater success and have legacies extending far beyond their initial runs, these articles provide important reminders of the musicals' early reception. Many of these musicals were so popular they were covered by less traditional media outlets like *Women's Wear Daily* and *The Christian Science Monitor*. While most of the published material comes from theater critics, in some rare cases, letters to the editor from readers provide insight into the reaction of general audience members.

Chapter Overview:

My inquiry begins in the 1980s, examining the archetype of the sympathetic white male protagonist at odds with the law in the megamusicals of the decade. In Chapter 1, I consider Joseph in *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* and Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables* as examples, showing how these men are exonerated through their faith in God, a message that would have been celebrated by members of the Moral Majority, a Republican political faction formally established in 1979 to mobilize the religious right against what they perceived as an

erosion of traditional values in America. During this period, the “I Love New York” campaign invited tourists from across the country to come to a newly-cleaned-up Times Square theater district with family-friendly shows that might have appealed to theatergoers with Judeo-Christian values. The Moral Majority is widely credited with helping to elect President Ronald Reagan, who formally initiated the War on Drugs and signed important legislation like the Comprehensive Crime Control Act of 1984 that abolished federal parole and lengthened prison sentences as a result. These enduringly popular musicals continued to entertain audiences throughout the 1980s and 1990s as incarceration rates continued to rise in the United States.

Chapter 2 considers musicals in the 1990s where marginalized men are incarcerated for committing a sex crime against a minor. During the 1990s, America was gripped by parallel moral panics over sex crimes and the AIDS crisis. Widely publicized sex crimes, particularly those against minors, led to offender registries and a focus on “stranger danger.” Fictional criminal procedural dramas like *Law & Order* as well as newly available live coverage of the courtroom proceedings for sensational crimes on CourtTV fed a public obsession with crime. Meanwhile, gay men faced renewed stigma as a result of the ongoing HIV/AIDS epidemic and highly publicized sexual offenders like Jeffrey Dahmer who targeted men and boys. These concerns were set against the backdrop of tough-on-crime political rhetoric that had been fueling a mass incarceration epidemic in the United States since the Reagan administration. In this chapter, I show how creatives on Broadway developed new musicals in the 1990s where sex crimes are central to the plot. In the span of just five years, director Hal Prince mounted two productions in which an incarcerated leading male protagonist is accused of a sex crime with a minor: *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1993) and *Parade* (1998). In both musicals, key aspects of identity isolate these protagonists from society and make them scapegoats for their alleged

crimes—Molina’s homosexuality in *Kiss of the Spider Woman* and Leo Frank’s Jewish heritage in *Parade*. Notably, neither character survives to the end of the musical. Critics and audiences panned these musicals for being too serious and dreary in their attempt to tackle complex social issues, and neither musical achieved the financial success of the megamusicals still dominating the Broadway stage.

In Chapter 3, I explain how disillusionment with American politics and the harsh economic realities of Broadway in the 1980s and 1990s led to a satirical tone in many of the musicals at the turn of the new millennium. In particular, two Broadway musicals from 2001 responded with satire and comedy to the precipitous rise in incarceration and policing in the United States over the preceding two decades, particularly as a result of the Clinton Crime Bill of 1994. Scholarship on contemporary musical theater has shown how during this same period, after a wave of largely unsuccessful “serious” musicals in the 1990s, Broadway creatives took a turn toward more escapist, satirical, and comically self-referential approaches to musical storytelling, often turning to popular films as source material as a way to draw in audiences. One example is Mel Brooks’s adaptation of his 1967 cult comedy *The Producers*, where two crooked theater producers are sent to prison for their financial crimes where they write a musical for the inmates to perform called *Prisoners of Love*, which eventually transfers to Broadway and opens to rave reviews, providing a happy ending for all. While some new musicals, like *The Producers*, were adaptations of popular films, other musicals looked backward and offered a pastiche of early political musicals like *The Threepenny Opera* and *The Cradle Will Rock*. In *Urinetown*—set in a dystopian future where private toilets are illegal and citizens are forced to use fee-based public facilities—a stage full of dancing police officers sing gleefully about the thrill of rounding up so-called criminals and sending them off to punishment (execution). I argue that the success

of these musicals, which both ran for several years after their opening in 2001, was largely fueled by a culture steeped in a decades-long escalation of the prison population. Further, I suggest that these musicals found new meaning in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the War on Terror. The passage of the USA PATRIOT Act and the establishment of the Guantanamo Bay Detention Center in Cuba heightened the themes of corruption, surveillance, and security already inherent in these musicals, making them even more resonant for audiences.

Chapter 1:

“Close Every Door to Me”:

Faith and Incarceration in the 1980s Megamusical

“Now every door is closed to me.
Another jail, another key, another chain.”
- Jean Valjean, “Prologue,” *Les Misérables*

“Just give me a number instead of my name,
Forget me completely and let me decay.”
- Joseph, “Close Every Door,” *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*¹

On May 18, 2003, the original Broadway production of *Les Misérables* gave its last performance more than sixteen years after its original opening in 1987. With 6,680 performances at the time of its closing, it was the second-longest-running musical in Broadway history, after Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *Cats*. On the musical’s final day, the *New York Times* published an opinion piece by Iain McCalman titled, “Javert’s Hunt Comes to an End.” McCalman explained the way that *Les Misérables* had “penetrated the American psyche,” and that “every reader knows [“Javert”] means a rigid, vengeful individual obsessed with the letter of the law irrespective of human cost.”²

That McCalman should highlight Javert as the cultural touchstone of this immensely popular musical, rather than the hero Jean Valjean, is significant. *Les Misérables* was a musical born out of a decade where conservative religious politics fueled “law and order” crime policies

¹ This pair of lyrics from the two musicals in this chapter highlight the uncanny similarities in their content. Jean Valjean is famously known by his prisoner number 24601, singing about it with his parole officer Javert throughout the musical. Meanwhile, the title of Joseph’s showstopping ballad “Close Every Door” is embedded in Jean Valjean’s lyrics describing his experience trying to find work and lodging as a convicted felon on parole.

² Iain McCalman, “Javert’s Hunt Comes to an End,” *New York Times*, May 18, 2003.

that led to the mass incarceration of hundreds of thousands of Americans. The musical continued to thrive into the new millennium as subsequent administrations passed laws that would lead America to become the nation with the highest incarceration rate in the world. McCalman explains how the musical still resonated with contemporary political themes, from giving comfort after 9/11 to anxiety over the impending war with Iraq. Yet as some Americans in 2003 feared a military conflict in the Middle East or bemoaned an eroding relationship with France under President Jacques Chirac (symbolized, McCalman suggested, by the closing of this “French” musical), audiences mourned the closing of *Les Misérables* out of a sense of nostalgia for an earlier time, namely the 1980s: “They loved the story of Jean Valjean, the persecuted convict, not despite but because of its harshness. To them, *Les Misérables* evokes a world we have lost, when life was physically and morally starker.”³

This chapter considers the intersection of faith and incarceration in two megamusicals from the 1980s, a decade characterized by a political awakening within conservative religious communities and the specter of violent crime rates in American cities. The mass incarceration epidemic in the United States can be traced back to the War on Drugs declared by President Ronald Regan in 1982.⁴ Though the “war” had been unofficially declared several years earlier by Richard Nixon, it was Reagan’s unfounded crusade and wanton legislative actions that led to skyrocketing numbers of arrests, convictions, and imprisonments. Reagan’s electoral success had been bolstered by a coalition of conservative evangelical Christians motivated into national politics by groups like Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority, who registered millions of new voters for

³ McCalman, “Javert’s Hunt Comes to an End.”

⁴ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, 10th anniversary ed. (New York: New Press, 2020), 6–8.

the GOP and used their newfound power as a significant voting bloc to influence the agenda of national politics. Race served as the underpinning for Reagan's Drug War, where Black and Latino populations were disproportionately affected by new drug enforcement policies, all under the guise of maintaining "law and order."

At the same time, New York city was attempting to clean up Times Square by eradicating pornography, prostitution, and other forms of adult entertainment as a way to attract white, affluent populations to the city center and theater district.⁵ Marketing campaigns encouraged domestic and international tourists to come to New York and see a Broadway shows, an industry also undergoing a radical transformation to suit new audiences from outside the city. In fact, some of the leading creative voices on Broadway during the 1980s came from outside New York as well, as British composers such as Andrew Lloyd Webber introduced a new kind of musical to Broadway audiences. These European "megamusicals" boasted long, epic plotlines, through-composed scores with little or no spoken dialogue, and spectacular production elements meant to dazzle audiences.⁶ Production budgets climbed, often backed by single, wealthy producers like Cameron Mackintosh who treated the musicals as money-making machines. These lavish, flashy, grandiose productions were smartly marketed to 1980s tourist audiences, who had often heard the music before entering the theater for the first time.

While scholars have given a great deal of attention to the aesthetic and economic transformations of the Broadway musical in the 1980s, they have yet to explore the way these musicals directly appealed to contemporary audiences by capitalizing on two of the prevailing

⁵ Elizabeth L. Wollman, "The Economic Development of the 'New' Times Square and Its Impact on the Broadway Musical." *American Music* 20, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 445–65.

⁶ Jessica Sternfeld, *The Megamusical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 1–3.

socio-political issues of the time: crime and religion. In Andrew Lloyd Webber's megamusical *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* (which had its first official Broadway production in 1982), the titular biblical character is sold into slavery by his brothers and ultimately finds himself imprisoned in an Egyptian jail cell, where he sings an impassioned ballad of hope, trusting in his faith in God to lead him out of his predicament. The production was characterized time and again as "family entertainment," particularly for those who would be intimately familiar with the biblical narrative. Like *Joseph*, which was actually developed and expanded over more than a decade before its Broadway premiere, *Les Misérables* was gestating in France in the late 1970s before getting revamped by British creatives in the early 1980s. By the time the musical adaptation of Victor Hugo's novel made it to New York in 1987, it had already been a smash success on London's West End and audiences flocked to see the tale of a former convict who undergoes a religious conversion and spends the rest of his life on run from his overzealous parole officer, escaping only by the grace of God.

In this chapter, I show how these two musicals reflect the ongoing political emphasis on conservative religious values and tough-on-crime rhetoric in the United States during the 1980s. Considered together, *Joseph* and *Les Mis* establish the archetype of the sympathetic white male protagonist at odds with the law who is ultimately saved through his (Judeo-)Christian faith. Yet, though rooted in the political moment, the specific political point of view in each of these musicals is left ambiguous and up for interpretation by the audience. While both offer a critique of the criminal justice system and incarceration, their positive portrayals of faith prevent them from directly indicting conservative religious values as responsible for the mass incarceration epidemic, particularly as both protagonists are white men rather than the people of color who were disproportionately affected by the War on Drugs. I argue that this whitewashed version of

the criminal justice system appealed to tourist audiences and is partly responsible for the overwhelming success of these musicals and their longevity throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s.

The New Christian Right and the War on Drugs

In the 1980s, conservative evangelical Christians played an increasingly important role in national politics. This was due in large part to the migration of Southern evangelicals to urban centers in the Midwest and particularly in Southern California, where they sought to remake local politics and spread their reforms to the nation at large. They ultimately achieved this goal on the largest possible scale with the election of California Governor Ronald Regan as president in 1980.⁷ Evangelicals had been initially thrilled by the election of Reagan’s predecessor, Democrat Jimmy Carter, as president in 1976. Carter was a Southern Baptist, a self-professed “born-again Christian” who read the Bible daily and taught Sunday school, and conservative Christians were delighted to have one of their own in the White House.⁸ However, evangelicals soon became disillusioned with Carter over his moderate-progressive views on social issues such as abortion and the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). Ultimately, the Carter administration’s approach to social issues and a series of progressive United States Supreme Court decisions were perceived by Christians as a threat to their values and way of life. As a result, many conservative evangelical leaders who had previously stayed out of national politics—a stance rooted in its own theological interpretation—to jump into the political sphere in ardent support of Republican

⁷ Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sun Belt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York: Norton, 2011).

⁸ Daniel K. Williams, *God’s Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 125.

candidates. This coalition of religious conservatives aligned with the Republican Party, one which has persisted over the last four decades, came to be known variously as the New Right, New Christian Right, Christian Right, and/or Religious Right.⁹

There was perhaps no more high-profile and at times controversial Christian Right figure than Jerry Falwell and his Moral Majority. Biographer Michael Sean Winters describes Falwell as one of the most consequential and profoundly impactful figures in late-twentieth-century America, one whose entry into politics made him a household name and redefined the national perception of what it meant to be a Christian.¹⁰ Falwell was a Baptist minister who founded the Thomas Road Baptist Church (a prototype for the modern megachurch), Liberty Baptist College (now Liberty University), and hosted his own radio/television ministry program known as the *Old-Time Gospel Hour*. In the late 1970s, like so many other conservative religious leaders, Falwell gathered like-minded colleagues to decide how best to address what they perceived as the moral failings of the nation. Moral Majority Inc. was formally established in June 1979, adopting a platform that was pro-life (anti-abortion and *Roe v. Wade*), pro-family (anti-gay and anti-ERA), pro-moral (opposed to pornography, drugs, and “secular humanism”), and pro-American (anti-communist and in favor of strong military/nuclear defense).¹¹ Falwell used his organization, which became a formal PAC shortly after its inception, to fundraise for and endorse specific Republican candidates up and down voter ballots across the U.S., while

⁹ For critical commentary on these names, see “Definitions and Terms,” in Randall Balmer, *Bad Faith: Race and the Rise of the Religious Right* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021), xv–xix.

¹⁰ Michael Sean Winters, *God’s Right Hand: How Jerry Falwell Made God a Republican and Baptized the American Right* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 1–2.

¹¹ Winters, *God’s Right Hand*, 115–121.

simultaneously registering a least two million new Republican voters.¹² The Moral Majority remained a high-profile religiopolitical force throughout the next decade; during its peak the 1980s, the organization boasted seven million members and its monthly newsletter the *Moral Majority Report* reached some 840,000 American homes.¹³

But despite the broad media attention garnered by Falwell and the Moral Majority during the 1980s, they were by no means the singular conservative religious figure or group influencing national politics. In truth, a variety of religious activists and organizations in the late 1970s helped galvanize a disparate and pluralistic collection of conservative Christians and actively involve them in national politics.¹⁴ One early effort (perhaps the very first national Christian Right organization) was Christian Voice, established in January of 1979 by Baptist minister Robert Grant.¹⁵ The group, which originated in California's Orange County and included some 200,000 members by 1981, brought anti-gay, anti-abortion, and anti-ERA policies together under one "pro-family" religious political organization, endorsing conservative candidates and ousting many liberal incumbents.¹⁶

Similarly, Pat Robertson, the media mogul who established the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN), sought to unify a diverse coalition of evangelicals with his "Washington for Jesus" rally in April 1980. Robertson had supported the evangelical Jimmy Carter for president

¹² Williams, *God's Own Party*, 171–179.

¹³ Angela Fritz, "Moral Majority," in *Religion and Politics in America: An Encyclopedia of Church and State in American Life*, ed. Frank J. Smith (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2016), 496.

¹⁴ Williams, *God's Own Party*; see also, Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right*, 2nd ed., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.

¹⁵ McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, 259.

¹⁶ Williams, *God's Own Party*, 164–167.

but had become disillusioned with what he perceived as a lack of follow-through on conservative issues. The event, scheduled on the anniversary of the first English settlers' arrival at Jamestown, drew 200,000 Christians to the capital and "fostered the idea of America as a Christian nation that had fallen from grace and urgently needed to be redeemed."¹⁷

Finally, Southern Baptist televangelist James Robison brought a broad group of conservatives (including Jews, Catholics, and Blacks) together under the umbrella of his organization called the Religious Roundtable. Robison had initially made waves in the 1979, when his on-air statements—purporting that homosexuals routinely recruited and murdered young boys, and that the recent assassinations of San Francisco politicians George Moscone and Harvey Milk were judgments from God—caused his Dallas TV-station to pull his program. Robison leaped into politics by fighting his cancelation, citing First Amendment rights to both speech and religion, and succeeded in having his program reinstated. After this, he turned his sights toward national and presidential politics. The Religious Roundtable, of which he was executive director, was "united in the belief that the federal government was hostile to conservate Christians, that the government had fostered the cause of 'secular humanism,' and that only a conservative political revolution could restore the country to morality."¹⁸

While abortion, homosexuality, and other "moral issues" are often pointed to as the animating social and political concerns of the New Right, recent scholars suggest this is essentially a narrative used to conceal their true motivation: racism.¹⁹ The Religious Right that

¹⁷ Williams, *God's Own Party*, 182.

¹⁸ Williams, *God's Own Party*, 184.

¹⁹ Balmer, *Bad Faith*; see also, Daniel S. Lucks, *Reconsidering Reagan: Racism, Republicans, and the Road to Trump* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020).

emerged in the 1970s was driven by a desire to preserve racial segregation in education, disguised as a defense of private Christian schools. The D.C. District Court case *Green v. Connally* (later upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Coit v. Green*) allowing the IRS to strip segregated religious schools (such as Bob Jones University) of their tax-exempt status was the catalyst that galvanized the Religious Right into political action. Reagan became the darling of the Religious Right and GOP not because of his stance on abortion (which was undermined by his abortion protection as governor of California), but rather his “law and order” rhetoric and defense of states’ rights, which have historically been construed as racist dog whistles.²⁰ As governor of California, Reagan had already openly established his conservative stance on issues related to race, frequently referring to Black people using derogatory epithets such as “welfare queens” and “young bucks” throughout the 1960s and 70s.²¹ During the 1980 presidential campaign, Reagan’s racially coded language appealed to religious conservative voters, and Reagan appealed to them by making speeches at Bob Jones University and the Religious Roundtable National Affairs Briefing, telling them “I want you to know that I endorse you and what you are doing.”²²

Indeed, the coordinated grassroots efforts of the Moral Majority and these other conservative Christian groups greatly contributed to Ronald Reagan’s defeat of incumbent Jimmy Carter in 1980. Their support also provided them with significant political lobbying power as a result. With Reagan in the White House, conservative Christians held unprecedented sway in national politics. As Lisa McGirr explains, “With Reagan’s election came a new seat at

²⁰ Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 69–70; Lucks, *Reconsidering Reagan*, 144–46.

²¹ Lucks, *Reconsidering Reagan*, 109, 119–123.

²² Williams, *God’s Own Party*, 187.

the table of national power not only for conservative economic elites who had established a growing number of think tanks in the 1970s to assert their cause, but also for the mass of religious Christians who had provided the social base for the movement and who now descended on Washington, lobbying to make their voices heard.”²³

One of President Reagan’s primary areas of concern was rising crime rates due to the perceived threat of illegal drug activity. In *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander outlines the history of the War on Drugs that led to a quadrupling of incarceration rates in the United States between 1960 and 1990.²⁴ Richard Nixon had declared illegal drugs “public enemy number one” in the 1970s, and Ronald Reagan’s election campaign rhetoric was primarily focused on drug crime and abuse of social welfare programs, including an assertion in 1980 that marijuana was “probably the most dangerous drug in the United States today.”²⁵ But by the mid-1980s, hysteria around drug use was largely concentrated on a new illegal substance: crack cocaine. Contrary to powder cocaine, which was used primarily by affluent whites, crack cocaine was cheaper and more accessible, and used primarily by Black and Latino populations. 1980s news media was filled with references to Black “crack babies,” “crack whores,” and “gangbangers,” and *Time* named crack the issue of the year in 1986.²⁶

Despite the fact that less than two percent of American poll respondents cited drug abuse as the most pressing problem confronting the nation, President Reagan made it a central focus of

²³ McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, 260.

²⁴ Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 9.

²⁵ Lucks, *Reconsidering Reagan*, 233.

²⁶ Lucks, *Reconsidering Reagan*, 235.

his early presidency, declaring a formal War on Drugs by October of 1982.²⁷ Reagan militarized his war by suspending the Posse Comitatus Act of 1878, thereby enabling a coordinated effort between federal law enforcement and the military, using SWAT teams to raid Black and Latino neighborhoods.²⁸ To ensure support for his efforts, he enlisted the help First Lady Nancy Reagan, who needed a public image boost after suffering attacks for her lavish spending on clothing and expensive redecorating of the White House in the early years of the Reagan presidency.²⁹ The First Lady took her “Just Say No” campaign to schools and communities nationwide. Meanwhile, a coordinated media campaign sensationalized the threat of crack cocaine in inner-city neighborhoods, communities that were suffering from economic collapse as a result of disappearing blue-collar factory work thanks to globalization and the subsequent gentrification of industrial zones.³⁰ Robert Stutman was the director of the New York City office of the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) during the 1980s, and served as chief media liaison. He recounts how he gave hundreds of media presentations to elevate the drug war to national attention, and that “the media were only too willing to cooperate, because as far as the New York media was concerned, crack was the hottest combat reporting story to come along since the end of the Vietnam War.”³¹

²⁷ Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 60–62.

²⁸ Lucks, *Reconsidering Reagan*, 233.

²⁹ Lucks, *Reconsidering Reagan*, 234.

³⁰ Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 63.

³¹ Robert Stutman, *Dead on Delivery: Inside the Drug Wars, Straight from the Street* (New York: Warner Books, 1992), 192; quoted in Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 66.

The president's campaign combined with the media attention inspired congressional action as well. One friend of both President Reagan and Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority was longtime South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond, who led the Senate Judiciary Committee from 1981 to 1987. Thurmond, a notorious segregationist and advocate of school prayer among other conservative Christian issues, introduced the Comprehensive Crime Control Act to the Senate in August of 1983.³² This bill was the first major revision of the U.S. criminal code since the early 1900s. Among its reforms, the bill established the United States Sentencing Commission (requiring courts to impose a sentence within the range set forth by the Commission), increased federal penalties for drug offenses (including marijuana), elevated a variety of lesser crimes to federal offenses, eliminated parole for federal crimes, and allowed for certain juveniles to be tried as adults. The bill was passed by an overwhelming bipartisan majority in both chambers of congress and signed into law by President Reagan in February 1984. The bill was hailed as a major step forward in combatting an epidemic of crime in U.S. cities such as New York.

But the War on Drugs did not stop with the CCCA. Just two years later, a bipartisan coalition in congress drafted the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, which funded drug prosecutors and the DEA, and eliminated judicial discretion by establishing mandatory minimum sentences for drug offenses. Most egregious was the 100-to-1 rule for cocaine, where a person convicted of possession of one gram of crack cocaine received the same sentence as a person possessing one hundred grams of powder cocaine.³³ Reagan's War on Drugs (perpetuated by the George H. W.

³² "S.1762 - 98th Congress (1983-1984): Comprehensive Crime Control Act of 1984," Congress.gov, accessed February 1, 2022. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/98th-congress/senate-bill/1762/summary/35>.

³³ Lucks, *Reconsidering Reagan*, 236–237.

Bush and Clinton administrations after him) was effectively a war on Black America. The sentencing disparity, mandatory minimums, and militarized raids in urban centers led to skyrocketing prison numbers, particular for people of color, yet these efforts were carried out in the name of making America, particularly its cities, safe.

Changing New York, Changing Broadway

New York's Times Square was a microcosm of the national efforts to crack down on drugs, crime, and "immoral" pursuits conservative Christians were raging against. By the mid 1970s, Times Square was largely a center for prostitution, pornography shops, and forms of adult entertainment, and mass media was describing it as one of the most dangerous areas in New York. In 1975, in response to budget cuts announced by Mayor Abe Beame, some NYPD officers began handing out leaflets depicting a hooded skull titled *Welcome to Fear City: A Survival Guide for Visitors to the City of New York* discouraging people from visiting the city.³⁴ The police were ordered to stop distributing the pamphlets though they were deemed acceptable forms of free speech.³⁵ During the late 1970s and 1980s, city officials and private investors put forth a series of proposals for how to rid Times Square of "undesirables" and make it more appealing to white, affluent visitors.³⁶ This was part of a larger trend of gentrification throughout Manhattan that was fueled by a reaction against nightlife and discos in other neighborhoods such

³⁴ Kevin Baker, "'Welcome to Fear City': The Inside Story of New York's Civil War, 40 Years On," *The Guardian*, May 18, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/may/18/welcome-to-fear-city-the-inside-story-of-new-yorks-civil-war-40-years-on>.

³⁵ Peter Kihss, "Police Leaders Decry Leaflets," *New York Times*, June 16, 1975.

³⁶ Themlis Chronopoulos, *Spatial Regulation in New York City: From Urban Renewal to Zero Tolerance* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2011), 58–77.

as the East Village and Flatiron District.³⁷ As with Reagan’s War on Drugs, the “undesirables” in Manhattan’s Times Square were invariably linked to non-white populations. In 1984, the New York State Urban Development Corporation released an environmental impact statement suggesting that the high number of Blacks and Latinos in Times Square—who were there largely to see movies and frequent less expensive establishments—made it difficult to determine “hustlers and loiterers” from those who were in the area for “legitimate purposes.”³⁸ Throughout the 1980s, people of color were displaced largely to make white visitors (both locals and tourists) more comfortable when patronizing one of the area’s primary industries: Broadway musicals.

Musicologist Elizabeth Wollman has documented how the transformation of New York’s Times Square during the 1980s and 90s impacted the Broadway theater industry, which became more commercial and catered to an increasingly tourist audience base.³⁹ This push can be traced back further to the late 1970s, when, in an attempt to combat the “Fear City” moniker, New York Governor Hugh Carey formed the New York Department of Economic Development to bolster the tourism market in the city.⁴⁰ Samantha Lampe has chronicled how survey research conducted by advertising agency Wells Rich Greene revealed Broadway musicals as the most significantly appealing draw for prospective New York City visitors. Wells Rich Greene CEO Mary Wells-Lawrence reportedly believed that, “Everybody loves New York, deep down inside,” and was

³⁷ Laam Hae, “Dilemmas of the Nightlife Fix: Post-Industrialisation and the Gentrification of Nightlife in New York City,” *Urban Studies* 48, no. 16 (2011): 3449–65.

³⁸ Chronopoulos, *Spatial Regulation in New York City*, 74.

³⁹ Wollman, “‘New’ Times Square.”

⁴⁰ Samantha Lampe, “Love for Sale: Broadway and the ‘I Love New York’ Campaign,” paper presented at the Song, Stage, and Screen conference of the International Society for the Study of Musicals, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, NY, June 27, 2024.

inspired to create the now familiar “I Love New York” campaign, using Broadway musicals as the hook to grab the emotions of would-be tourists.⁴¹ The first of many “I Love New York” television commercials throughout the late 1970s and 1980s aired on Valentine’s Day, 1978 and featured the casts of *A Chorus Line*, *The Wiz*, *Grease*, *The King and I*, and *Annie* singing the “I Love New York” jingle.⁴² As these ads began coaxing new and broader audiences to New York, shows began to change to shift appeal to these demographics.

The 1980s was a period of great change in the Broadway industry, particularly as the AIDS epidemic swept through the community, taking the lives of some of the best and brightest creatives in the field. Some have argued that the artistic vacuum created by the AIDS epidemic allowed for the so-called “British Invasion” of high-powered producers such as Cameron Mackintosh, who ushered in the kind of grandiose extravaganzas that came to be known as megamusicals.⁴³ As Jessica Sternfeld has outlined, megamusicals were defined by their epic historical narratives, through-composed scores, and spectacular sets and costumes, combined with savvy international marketing and distribution worldwide.⁴⁴ These new European imports appealed to audiences from outside New York, both domestic and international, particularly as it was not always necessary to understand English to appreciate their spectacle.⁴⁵ Still, as

⁴¹ Mary Wells-Lawrence, *A Big Life in Advertising* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 139.

⁴² New York State Archives, “I Love New York-Broadway (2 of 5), 1980s,” *YouTube*, October 6, 2011. Accessed October 14, 2024. Video, 1:06. <https://youtu.be/IrT97o3eeBI?si=28V5fqjocbSVT1Uj>.

⁴³ *On Broadway*, directed by Oren Jacoby (2019; New York, NY: Kino Lorber, 2021), DVD.

⁴⁴ Sternfeld, *The Megamusical*, 1–4. See also: Paul Prece and William A. Everett, “The Megamusical: The Creation, Internationalisation and Impact of the Genre,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical*, 2nd edition, edited by William A. Everett and Paul R. Laird, 250–269 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁴⁵ Sternfeld, *The Megamusical*, 77.

advertising campaigns by the City of New York encouraged domestic travel to the city as a (newly cleaned up) tourist destination, American families with their children in tow were seeking theater options that aligned with and affirmed their values. Thus, in the years following the election of president Ronald Reagan, the most successful Broadway productions were those that appealed to a broad range of audiences, including religious conservatives.

The pervasive influence and foregrounding of faith, specifically Christianity, in American politics had not gone unnoticed by the theater community. During the early years of the Jesus Movement in the 1970s, Broadway creatives responded to the sociopolitical culture around them by producing shows with a religious theme, including Stephen Schwartz's *Godspell* (Off-Broadway 1971, Broadway 1976) and Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Jesus Christ Superstar* (Broadway 1971, West End 1972), both retellings of the Christian gospel narrative. As this trend of religious theater continued to grow into the 1980s, critics and audiences took notice. In December 1981, *New York Daily News* religion editor Charles Bell wrote a column titled, "Bringing in the Greasepaint Gospel," describing a spate of religious shows currently running in New York and pointing to a "general revival of religious interest" in American culture. One pastor who was interviewed for the article described a "back-to-the-Bible mood in the country," while another explained, "We've come out of the God-is-dead thing in the '60s and the theater, like everything else, reflects this."⁴⁶

One of the musicals mentioned in Bell's article was Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, based on the Old Testament story of Joseph and his coat of many colors. By the early 1980s, composer Andrew Lloyd Webber and lyricist Tim Rice were among Broadway's hottest new stars whose names had become synonymous with the British-

⁴⁶ Charles W. Bell, "Bringing in the Greasepaint Gospel," *New York Daily News*, December 24, 1981.

import megamusical. Riding on the success of their earlier West End-to-Broadway hits *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1971) and *Evita* (1979), their next, somewhat surprising, Broadway venture would be a production of *Joseph*, a show that began as a fifteen-minute “pop cantata” for London schoolchildren in the late 1960s. The piece was fleshed out through a series of productions in the U.K. and U.S. during the 1970s, including a televised version and accompanying record produced in 1972 and a 1976 production at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.⁴⁷ In 1980, the *New York Times* announced a new production directed by Tony Tanner that opened in Washington D.C. in 1981, followed by an Off-Broadway opening in New York that transferred to Broadway in January 1982, starring Bill Hutton in the titular role and Laurie Beechman as the narrator.

Taken from the Book of Genesis, the tale is that of Jacob’s favorite son Joseph, whose jealous brothers sell him into slavery where he eventually lands in jail, but gains favor with Egypt’s Pharaoh for correctly interpreting his dreams and bringing prosperity to the nation. Throughout Joseph’s misfortunes, it is his undying faith in God that sustains his hope and optimism. *New York Times* reviewer Frank Rich called it “decidedly a musical for young people, the sort of show that could serve as an introduction to the theater and also to Bible study. All singing, no talking, it is both a pop opera and a Sunday school pageant.”⁴⁸ Indeed, its brief running time—the original Broadway cast album of the through-composed musical is only fifty-three minutes long—made it an ideal musical for a family with children visiting New York. Further capitalizing on the brevity, subject matter, and indeed even the structure of the musical’s libretto, Rice and Lloyd Webber even published a complete version of the text as an illustrated

⁴⁷ Sternfeld, *The Megamusical*, 106–110.

⁴⁸ Frank Rich, “Theater: *Joseph and the Dreamcoat*,” *New York Times*, November 19, 1981.

children's book with pictures by Quentin Blake to coincide with the original 1982 Broadway production.⁴⁹

In many ways, bondage and incarceration are at the heart of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, but the musical's fast-paced structure and cheerful, storybook approach keeps the audience from dwelling on the topic for too long.⁵⁰ First, Joseph is sold into slavery by his jealous brothers to a group of Ishmaelites headed for Egypt. The narrator describes Joseph as being bound in chains and lightheartedly says he knows the experience "wouldn't be a picnic."⁵¹ Once in Egypt, Joseph finds himself in service to the wealthy businessman Potiphar. In a vaudeville-style soft shoe number, the audience is introduced to Potiphar as "one of Egypt's millionaires," and learns that Potiphar "made a fortune buying shares in pyramids." Joseph earns favor with Potiphar through his good behavior and earns a "maximum promotion" to head of the household. In an era of trickle-down Reaganomics that favored big business, the image of a wealthy slave-owner with "very few cares" would likely have resonated with audiences, but any ascribed villainy is deflected by Potiphar's good treatment of Joseph and transferred to his scheming wife.

⁴⁹ Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, with pictures by Quentin Blake (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1982).

⁵⁰ Regrettably, the Theatre on Film and Tape archive at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts does not have a video recording of the 1982 Broadway production of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. They do have a recording of the Broadway revival from 1994, which is analyzed later in this chapter. The commentary and analysis presented here is thus drawn from the score and libretto.

⁵¹ The lyrics from *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* quoted in this dissertation are drawn from the complete libretto published as a children's book in 1982 (cited above). The copyright page indicates that the libretto is reproduced with permission from Novello, who held the rights to the score. The pages of the book are, regrettably, unnumbered. The original Broadway cast recording was released by Chrysalis in 1982. A complete vocal score was later published in 1991 by Really Useful Group and distributed by Hal Leonard.

The song goes on to say Potiphar's wife, who was "beautiful but evil," tried to seduce Joseph and get him to "lie" with her, despite Joseph's protestation that he doesn't believe in "free love." Firmly rooted in the show's 1960s roots, this joking reference to the counterculture's sexual liberation movement was nevertheless relevant for audiences in the 1980s, by which point conservative "family values" had begun to surge. Joseph's protestations and attempts to flee attract the attention of Potiphar, who assumes Joseph is complicit in the tryst. In an epic glam rock phrase, the narrator recounts Potiphar bursting into the room with a "mighty roar" and singing, "Joseph, I'll see you rot in jail. The things you have done are beyond the pale." At this point, an angelic chorus of women sings a reprise of "Poor, Poor Joseph," first heard when Joseph is sold into slavery. This time they sing, "Poor, poor Joseph, locked up in a cell, / Things ain't going well, hey, locked up in a cell." The perspective being emphasized here is one of pity for the incarcerated, but it is specifically because Joseph is wrongfully jailed despite being a good and faithful servant of the Lord.

The solo that follows serves to underscore the negative view of prison. In one of the show's most iconic numbers, "Close Every Door," Joseph sings an impassioned ballad from his jail cell, lamenting the experience of incarceration while detailing the hope and faith he has in God to deliver him. Tim Rice's lyrics paint a grim portrait of what it means to be incarcerated, particularly drawing on references to darkness and solitude (Figure 1).

Though Lloyd Webber's score for *Joseph* is notably eclectic, drawing on various pop genres from country western to rock and roll, the music for this number is replete with exoticist gestures that are meant to evoke the Middle East for Western audiences. The music begins in F minor, establishing the key through alternating tonic and major leading-tone triads by using the

Figure 1: Lyrics to “Close Every Door” with structural and harmonic analysis

A	Close every door to me, Hide all the world from me Bar all the windows And shut out the light	F minor
A'	Do what you want with me, Hate me and laugh at me Darken my daytime And torture my night	F minor
B	If my life were important I Would ask will I live or die But I know the answers lie Far from this world	A-flat major Half cadence in F minor
A'	Close every door to me, Keep those I love from me Children of Israel Are never alone	F minor
B	For I know I shall find My own peace of mind For I have been promised A land of my own	A-flat major Authentic Cadence in F minor
A	Just give me a number Instead of my name Forget all about me And let me decay	F minor
A'	I do not matter, I'm only one person Destroy me completely Then throw me away	F minor
B	If my life were important I Would ask will I live or die But I know the answers lie Far from this world	A-flat major Half cadence in F minor
A	Close every door to me, Keep those I love from me Children of Israel Are never alone	F minor
B	For we know we shall find Our own peace of mind For we have been promised A land of our own	A-flat major Authentic cadence in F minor

mediant as a common tone, giving the music a mystic quality (Figure 2).⁵² As Joseph sings the opening lines, the harmony shifts to a more traditional alternation between i (F minor) and V (C major), but the melody repeatedly dips down to highlight the minor-second interval of 6 falling to 5. The strophic structure of the song repeats a series of AA'B stanzas. Between the two parallel A sections Lloyd Webber again nods to the exotic (and the Jewish) with an instrumental line outlining the augmented second between 6 and the raised leading tone (5–6–#7–6–5).

Figure 2: “Close Every Door” opening bars

The musical score for the opening bars of "Close Every Door" is presented in 3/4 time and F minor. The vocal line begins with a whole rest for four measures, followed by the melody: "Close ev-'ry door to me, hide all the world from me". The piano accompaniment consists of a bass line and a treble line. The bass line features a descending minor second interval (6 to 5) in the first four measures, and then continues with a similar pattern. The treble line features chords: Fm, E, Fm, F, Fm, C7(b9), Fm, C7(b9). The chord symbols are: Fm, E, Fm, F, Fm, C7(b9), Fm, C7(b9).

Yet each stanza takes a positive turn in the B section, modulating to the relative major (A-flat), where Joseph shifts his perspective toward his faith in God (e.g., “For I know I shall find / My own peace of mind / For I have been promised a land of my own”). The shift from minor to major reflects Joseph’s hope for exoneration, which he derives from his faith. Even still,

⁵² The published score notates the chord alternating with the tonic chord in the first four measures in contradictory ways. The printed chord symbol indicates E (major), but the chord is spelled with an enharmonic A-flat rather than a G-sharp (presumably because the note is tied across all four measures). Other scores and published sheet music for the song sometimes indicate this chord as an F-flat major chord, spelled with a F-flat and C-flat rather than E and B. The function of the chord as a kind of dominant built on the leading tone (E) of F minor supports the E major designation as opposed to a flat tonic.

each B section is eventually dragged back down into F minor, ending with either a half cadence or authentic cadence in the home key, keeping the mood solemn. This is true even for the bombastic finish to the song, where the lyrics turn from the first-person singular to the plural, expanding to all the children of Israel. Joseph may know he, and they, will find peace of mind, but it remains uncertain as to when that will be.

Of course, Joseph's internment does not last long: aside from the prophetic lyrics telling of the promised land, the audience knows that Joseph will not remain in jail forever. *Joseph* catered directly to Judeo-Christian audiences who would be familiar with the biblical narrative. Just moments after "Close Every Door," the narrator assures Joseph (and the audience) that "we've read the book, and you come out on top."⁵³ In fact, Joseph would be lifted out of his incarcerated state and into government service—a trope that will be echoed later with Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables*.

After "Close Every Door," Joseph is joined in prison by two servants of Pharaoh, "both in the doghouse for doing their thing." There is no further explanation as to why these men are jailed, but the text seems to imply that they, like Joseph, had had unjust run-ins with the law and had more or less ended up in prison at the whim of someone with more social and political clout. Joseph helps his cellmates by interpreting their dreams. For the butler, all will soon be forgiven and he will soon be back at the Pharaoh's side. The baker is not so lucky, and Joseph is forced to tell him, "Pharaoh has it in for you, your execution date is set." These two opposing fates of what appear to be equally innocent men at the hands of an authoritarian ruler are a grim reminder of a fickle criminal justice system. The audience is not allowed to dwell on the unfortunate fate of the

⁵³ Interestingly, this lyric does not appear in the children's book edition of the libretto from 1982 or the published vocal score from 1991. The lyric can be heard on the original Broadway cast album from 1982, however, suggesting that this is the lyric heard by Broadway audiences at the time.

baker, for soon after his fate is foretold the ensemble launches into a rousing Act I finale “Go, Go, Go Joseph,” cheering Joseph on and telling him he’ll “make it someday.”

“Someday,” it turns out, is just after intermission. Act II opens with the narrator offering a storybook overview of the political landscape of Ancient Egypt. Pharaoh is described as a “powerful man” who rules with absolute authority. Here, librettist Tim Rice offers a bit of cheeky commentary, having the narrator say, “No one had rights or a vote but the king. / In fact, you could say he was fairly right-wing.” Regardless of their own personal political ideologies, a Broadway audience member in 1982 would not have been able to ignore this dig at conservative politics, be it the New Christian Right, U.S. president Ronald Reagan, or even Margaret Thatcher, the Conservative Party leader who became Prime Minister of the United Kingdom in 1979, especially as both the composer and librettist of the musical were British. In particular, Reagan’s “law and order” rhetoric would align with the depictions of crime and punishment that have occurred up to this point in the musical. Next, the narrator describes an imprisoned Joseph as being “down at the other end of the scale,” a scale with political leadership at one end and incarceration at the other. Likewise, President Reagan’s disparaging comments about the poor, including “welfare queens,” and harsher sentencing for crack cocaine over powder cocaine—a distinction that fell along class and therefore racial lines—mirrors the idea of a wealthy ruling class (like Potiphar and Pharaoh) sending poor, defenseless people like Joseph to prison for life. Indeed, the narrator explains that, “even though [Joseph] is in with the guards / a lifetime in prison seems quite on the cards.”⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Though not at all apparent in the casting or depiction in the *Joseph* musical, race is actually at play in the power dynamic in the biblical Joseph story. The twelve brothers (sons of Jacob, also called Israel; in other words, Israelites) in Canaan would have been a different race than the Egyptians and Pharaoh. Of course, later in the biblical narrative the Egyptians would enslave the Israelites, as told in the Exodus story.

Luckily, Pharaoh is looking for someone to explain his strange dreams. His butler, who had previously been jailed along with Joseph and had his own good fortune foretold through Joseph's gift of dream interpretation, sends for Joseph. On Joseph's entrance, the musical mood, heretofore upbeat and major, shifts dramatically with a return of the angry glam rock first heard when Potiphar burst through the door and discovered Joseph with his wife. The narrator describes Joseph as "chained and bound, afraid, alone" as he kneels before the throne. As with most brief serious moments in this musical, the dramatic tension is quickly dispersed as a supposedly intimidating Pharaoh launches into a pastiche of an Elvis Presley song as he explains his dreams. Following the Genesis narrative, Joseph explains that the dreams indicate seven years of bumper crop followed by seven years of drought and famine. The Pharaoh is so impressed with Joseph that he immediately orders his chains to be broken, grants him a royal pardon, and appoints him as his "number two." Joseph leads Egypt through the famine celebrated by Pharaoh and all the rest of the land, and sings one particularly trite moral of the show: "Anyone from anywhere can make it, if they get a lucky break."

The New York production ran for nearly two years in various venues between November 1981 and September 1983 and was followed by a national tour. Its themes of religious faith and incarceration continued to resonate and gather steam throughout the 1980s, which perhaps fueled a revamped production in the early 1990s in the U.K., Canada, Australia, and the U.S., leading to a return to Broadway in 1993 in time for the holiday tourist season. One reviewer highlighted the timing by describing the new production as "family entertainment," an "audience-pleaser" that

“won’t go away.”⁵⁵ The *New York Post* called it “a natural for Jews and Christians.”⁵⁶ Most aspects of this revival production expanded on the “mega” in megamusical, including a lengthy disco-medley at the end of the production known as the “Megamix.” The production starred soap opera star Michael Damian in the title role and also incorporated local children’s choirs from Westchester, the Bronx, Long Island, and New Jersey, who sang softly as support during Joseph’s “Close Every Door,” reinforcing the focus on children and family.⁵⁷ Yet perhaps in light of the War on Drugs and spike in incarceration rates over the previous decade, reviews of the revival tended to be more acerbic. Despite being a British musical, some keyed in on its resonance with American values. Writing for *New York Newsday*, Linda Winer referred to the piece as a “\$5-million nonstop homage to mindless Americana.” She goes on to criticize the absurdity of Joseph’s hypersexualized, homoerotic, Christlike prison number “Close Every Door,” writing,

Picture Joseph (soap-opera demi-hunk Michael Damian with Jesus Christ hair, big muscles and a small voice), in a Greco-beefcake diaper, on his knees in prison, crooning huskily, “Do what you want with me . . . darken my daytime and torture my night.”⁵⁸

The staging of “Close Every Door” in earlier productions of *Joseph* had typically included a smaller jail cell erected onstage enclosing Joseph. In keeping with the other larger-than-life aspects of the 1993 revival, however, the new production featured a set of iron bars that

⁵⁵ Frank Scheck, “Musical Offers Family Fun for the New York Holiday Season,” *Christian Science Monitor*, November 19, 1993.

⁵⁶ Clive Barnes, “Like a Bat out of Showbiz Hell,” *New York Post*, November 11, 1993.

⁵⁷ Linda Winer, “New ‘Coat’ Comes in a Maxi Size,” *New York Newsday*, November 11, 1993.

⁵⁸ Linda Winer, “New ‘Coat’ Comes in a Maxi Size.”

flew down covering the entirety of the stage, not only in front of Joseph but behind him as well.⁵⁹ The prison bars are unrealistically wide, allowing all of Joseph's mostly unclothed body to be seen between two bars. The image of a shirtless Joseph behind bars has become inextricably associated with the musical, featured in promotional materials, reviews, and news articles about the production. These depictions of an incarcerated man echo the longstanding practice of publishing mugshots of wanted or convicted criminals, and appeared during a time when incarceration rates were on the rise in the United States. Yet for *Joseph*, this overtly sexualized image was meant to entice audiences to come, capitalizing on the rising public concern with crime. Indeed, while most critics simply dismissed the original Broadway production as fluffy holiday tourist competition for *The Nutcracker* and Radio City Rockettes, Carol Cooper of *The Village Voice* pointed to the inherent political contradictions in this production, describing it as "family entertainment within a calculated setting of socially dissonant elements."⁶⁰ Cooper likewise chided the vacuity of the production and its lead Joseph, writing, "If gods and heroes must be reduced to Horatio Alger types, too bad they cannot be allowed to react to life's painful incongruities as we do."

Les Misérables

The intersection of crime and faith is perhaps best exemplified by another blockbuster musical of the 1980s, the megamusical adaptation of Victor Hugo's novel *Les Misérables*, which opened on the West End in 1985 and on Broadway in 1987. At its core, the musical is about a

⁵⁹ *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, filmed May 19, 1994, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Billy Rose Theatre Division, Theatre on Film and Tape Archive, NCOV 1671.

⁶⁰ Carol Cooper, review of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, *The Village Voice*, December 16, 1981.

formerly incarcerated man who experiences a religious conversion, breaks his parole, and spends his life on the run from the police, earning the sympathy of the audience through his faith in God and acts of goodwill. Jessica Sternfeld suggests that the success of the musical was due in large part to its broader religious themes: “freedom and justice for the poor, crimes committed by good people for good causes, young love, relentless pursuit in the name of heavenly justice.”⁶¹ Like Rice and Lloyd Webber’s *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, the original French musical by lyricist Alain Boublil and composer Claude-Michel Schönberg underwent massive reworking during the early 1980s to prepare it for London and New York audiences. In particular, the new creative team (which included two directors, Trevor Nunn and John Caird in addition to producer Cameron Mackintosh) were keen to embellish the theme of religion and the central role it played in the lives of the main characters.⁶²

The frame of faith and its connection to criminal justice is established in the first fifteen minutes of the musical. During the Prologue, the audience sees the protagonist Jean Valjean released from prison with a warning from his parole officer not to stray. As Valjean attempts to reenter society, he struggles to find work or housing due to his status as a convicted criminal. After being taken in and shown kindness by a bishop, Valjean experiences a religious conversion, tears up his parole papers, and assumes a false identity. For the remainder of the musical, Valjean is on the run from his parole officer Javert, who believes criminals are innately corrupt and prays to God to let him find Valjean and again place him “safe behind bars.” The theme of crime and punishment was evident in all aspects of the musical. One reviewer noted how even the set designs contributed to a feeling of confinement for the audience, noting how

⁶¹ Sternfeld, *The Megamusical*, 178.

⁶² Sternfeld, *The Megamusical*, 181.

“John Napier’s designs cast an ominous spell over the whole theater, plunging us into a somber, prisonlike world that light seldom penetrates.”⁶³ Yet, despite its nineteenth-century setting, this late-1980s musical was enormously relevant given the political attention and action on crime coupled with the religious fervor of the New Christian Right.

The focus on crime in 1980s American politics may have influenced the Broadway musical’s opening sequence, one that foregrounds incarceration as the central theme of the musical. Eschewing a traditional overture of tunes, the musical begins with an eight-bar introduction based on the opening number, “Look Down,” sung by the inmates on the chain gang describing the miserable conditions of their imprisonment. The low brass and percussion instruments enter with a strong dominant-tonic leap (which will eventually be accompanied by the lyrics “look down”) and the strings and winds respond with a fanfare-like minor tonic chord in dotted eighth-sixteenth rhythm akin to a French overture. This musical theme is first introduced in E-flat minor and then a fourth higher in A-flat minor. After a tutti statement of the melody that slows into a fermata, a cymbal crash gives way to a synthesizer pulsing in F minor and the scene officially begins.⁶⁴

Yet this now iconic introduction to the musical was actually not the original opening, as it was adjusted between the London and New York productions.⁶⁵ The West End version featured a similarly brief musical introduction—a minor-mode version of the descending arpeggio motive used throughout the musical (first at the beginning of “At the End of the Day,” the official

⁶³ Howard Kissel, “A Rabble Rouser,” *Daily News*, March 13, 1987.

⁶⁴ Jessica Sternfeld has thoroughly analyzed and outlined the significance of this musical motif in *The Megamusical*, 194.

⁶⁵ These alternate openings can be heard when comparing the original West End cast recording with the original Broadway cast recording.

opening number of Act I immediately following the Prologue, then later during “Who Am I?” and in “One Day More,” the finale to Act I, though always in the major mode). For Broadway, however, the opening was rewritten to emphasize the importance of the chain gang’s song not only as a frame for the opening scene, but the whole musical.⁶⁶ As the scene begins, the melody originally heard in the orchestra is now sung by a chain gang of inmates. The score reads, “The Chain Gang, overseen by brutal wardens, work in the sun.”⁶⁷ The vocal line first sung as a wordless vocalise (marked “nasal hum” in the score) as an inmate work song. When they begin to sing text, they lament their station and cry out to God for help singing lines such as “sweet Jesus, hear my prayer” and “how long, O Lord, before you let me die?” These evocations of a Christian God immediately set a religious tone for the musical and would elicit sympathy from a religious audience member.

Next, Jean Valjean is called forward by his inmate number, and the parole system is explained to him (and, by extension, the audience) by the policeman Javert:

Javert: Now bring me prisoner 24601: Your time is up and your parole’s begun, you know what that means.

Valjean: Yes, it means I’m free.

Javert: No. It means you get your yellow ticket-of-leave, you are a thief.

Valjean: I stole a loaf of bread.

Javert: You robbed a house.

Valjean: I broke a window pane. My sister’s child was close to death and we were starving.

Javert: You will starve again unless you learn the meaning of the law.

Valjean: I know the meaning of those nineteen years, a slave of the law.

Javert: Five years for what you did, the rest because you tried to run, yes, 24601.

⁶⁶ Jessica Sternfeld offers an extended account of the various incarnations of the “Look Down” melody in *The Megamusical*, 193–95.

⁶⁷ The lyrics here and elsewhere are taken from *The Complete Book of Les Misérables* by Edward Behr (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1989), here 165.

Valjean: My name is Jean Valjean.

Javert: And I'm Javert. Do not forget my name. Do not forget me 24601.⁶⁸

The parole system, as Javert insists, is not freedom, but an extension of Valjean's punishment, forever labeling him a thief. This exchange sets up the relationship between Valjean and Javert for the remainder of the musical: Valjean, wrongfully punished for a crime of necessity, running from his parole officer Javert who firmly believes that criminals are incorrigible. American audiences might have paid special attention to this scene, as the subject of parole was of national political importance in the United States during the 1980s. The Comprehensive Crime Control Act of 1984 had abolished the possibility of parole for federal crimes, despite the fact that even those who are granted parole struggle to reenter society, a narrative that is played out in *Les Misérables*.⁶⁹

Indeed, as the scene continues and Valjean attempts to find work and housing, he is repeatedly turned away when he shows his parole papers. Throughout this section, musical variations on the "Look Down" melody underscore Valjean's futile search for a dignified life as a formerly incarcerated man, recalling the original lyric, "look down, look down, you'll always be a slave." First, as Valjean searches for work in the fields, he is accompanied by a docile version of "Look Down" with the melody played on a flute and a countermelody in the oboe, pastoral instruments related to agrarian life. This sweet interlude is next interrupted by harsh, dissonant chords punctuating lines of recitative, during which Valjean is told he will be paid off for the day and asked to leave. When Valjean remarks that he has been paid half as much as the

⁶⁸ Behr, *The Complete Book of Les Misérables*, 165.

⁶⁹ "Comprehensive Crime Control Act of 1984," Legal Information Institute, Cornell Law School, last updated July 2024, https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/comprehensive_crime_control_act_of_1984.

other men, a fellow laborer replies, “You broke the law, it’s there for people to see. Why should you get the same as honest men like me?”⁷⁰ This is followed by a brief inner monologue sung by

Valjean, who sings:

Now every door is closed to me.⁷¹
Another jail. Another key. Another chain.
For when I come to any town
They check my papers
And they find the mark of Cain.
In their eyes
I see their fear:
“We do not want you here.”⁷²

Valjean, who has not yet experienced his religious conversion, nevertheless uses a biblical reference—the mark of Cain—to describe the stigma associated with a criminal record.

Following this brief solo, a new rendition of “Look Down” serves as the next musical interlude, this time a raucous version with an oom-pah bass and the melody played in parallel tritones.

Valjean has come to seek shelter at an inn, but is turned away by the innkeeper’s wife who tells him her rooms are full and they have no food to spare. When Valjean presses her, the innkeeper intervenes and barks, “You leave my house! Or feel the weight of my rod. We’re law-abiding people here, thanks be to God.” After being chased from the inn, Valjean sings:

And now I know how freedom feels,
The jailer always at your heels
It is the law!
This piece of paper in my hand
That makes me cursed throughout the land
It is the law!
Like a cur

⁷⁰ Behr, *The Complete Book of Les Misérables*, 166.

⁷¹ Note the similarity, here, to the title lyric of Joseph’s “Close Every Door to Me.”

⁷² Behr, *The Complete Book of Les Misérables*, 166.

I walk the street,
The dirt beneath their feet . . .

These brief vignettes in the Prologue portray the very real effects of what Michelle Alexander calls the “prison label,” a black mark on the formerly incarcerated that makes it extremely difficult to find work and housing.⁷³ She writes:

It is the badge of inferiority—the felony record—that relegates people for their entire lives to second-class status. . . .Barred from public housing by law, discriminated against by private landlords, ineligible for food stamps, forced to “check the box” indicating a felony conviction on employment applications for nearly every job, and denied licenses for a wide range of professions, people whose only crime is drug addiction or possession of a small amount of drugs for recreational use find themselves locked out of the mainstream society and economy—permanently.⁷⁴

With incarceration rates growing during the 1980s, people who had served prison time struggled to get back on their feet after being released. Discrimination against applicants with a criminal record had become so harmful by 1987 that the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission had to issue revised guidelines banning wholesale prohibitions against employment based on prior convictions as a violation of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act because of its disproportionate racial impact.⁷⁵ Yet here again, in *Les Misérables* audiences were witnessing a white man struggling with reentry and being mistreated by society, perhaps eliciting more of a sympathetic response from audiences.

Ultimately, Jean Valjean is out of options as a former convict and is left with no choice but to break his parole (dramatically tearing up his yellow ticket), assume a false identity, and

⁷³ Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 117–120; 189–93.

⁷⁴ Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 118.

⁷⁵ Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 191.

live on the run for the rest of his life.⁷⁶ Throughout the musical, Valjean has several run-ins with his parole officer Javert, but manages to evade capture. This chase is the central element of the musical's plot and it was explicitly spelled out as such for audiences. In advance of the Broadway opening, the *New York Times* ran a lengthy article titled "The Hunter and the Hunted" about the relationship between Valjean and Javert and the way the musical amplifies and centralizes this storyline from Hugo's novel.⁷⁷ The article features a large photograph of Javert holding his police baton to Valjean's face, a popular press image used to promote the show, suggesting its importance to the musical's message (Figure 3). Various creatives and performers were interviewed for their take on the relevance of this storyline, but co-director John Caird's words closing the article sum it up best. He says, "As long as justice in our society means the seeking of revenge, there will be cases like Jean Valjean and Javert's. That's why it's a quintessential story. The chase is ultimately about a man attempting to find the divine in himself, constantly being reduced to an animal by another man."⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Like Joseph in *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, Valjean eventually ends up rising up from the carceral system into the ranks of government, becoming mayor (under his false identity). His position of power briefly blinds him to the plight of the factory worker Fantine, whose daughter he eventually adopts as penance for allowing Fantine to be cast out of work and into prostitution (leading to her sickness and death).

⁷⁷ Jeremy Gerard, "The Hunter and the Hunted," *New York Times*, March 8, 1987.

⁷⁸ Jeremy Gerard, "The Hunter and the Hunted."

Figure 3: Valjean and Javert in the *New York Times*



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Law and Order Javert

The character of Javert mirrors the unyielding faith-based approach to law and order espoused by Ronald Reagan and the New Right during the 1980s. Some of the most compelling language in the libretto articulating Javert's position on crime comes during an early scene between Valjean and Javert called "The Confrontation." Valjean has dramatically revealed his

true identity in the middle of a courtroom proceeding in order to save someone who has been wrongfully arrested and tried on his account. Valjean tells Javert he can find him at the hospital, where he pledges to a dying Fantine that he will raise her daughter as his own. After Fantine’s death, Javert enters, mocking Valjean saying, “‘M’sieur le Mayor,’ / You’ll wear a different chain.”⁷⁹ Here, Javert’s melody—and the music that underscores the rest of this confrontation—is based on the work song from the opening of the Prologue, sung by the prison inmates on the chain gang. Javert is musically addressing Valjean as a convict as he threatens him with chains (Figure 4).


Figure 4: Comparison of “Look Down” and “Confrontation”

Convicts ("Work Song")



Look down, look down, don't look 'em in the eye. Look down, look down, you're here un-til you die.

Javert ("Confrontation")



Val - jean, at last we see each oth-er plain. Mon- sieur le Maire you'll wear a diff-'rent chain.

Valjean asks for time to make arrangements for Fantine’s daughter, to which Javert replies, “You must think me mad! / I’ve hunted you across the years. / Men like you can never change. / A man such as you.”⁸⁰ What follows is a duet where the two men sing different text at

⁷⁹ Behr, *The Complete Book of Les Misérables*, 172.

⁸⁰ Behr, *The Complete Book of Les Misérables*, 172.

the same time, simulating an argument. The simultaneous performance of the lyrics obscures their coherence for the audience, which is unfortunate, considering Javert's text in particular provides key insight into his character's history and motivations (see Figure 5). Javert roots his understanding of morality in faith and the Christian doctrine of original sin, stating, "Every man is born in sin, / Every man must choose his way." For Javert, whose "duty's to the law," crime is a choice, and the choice is always wrong. He does not understand the idea of a crime of necessity, like Valjean stealing bread to survive.⁸¹ Yet, despite Valjean's assertion during this argument that Javert knows "nothing of [his] life," Javert reveals that he was born in a prison, which he describes as "the gutter" filled with "scum," thus forming a link between the two men.⁸² Yet Javert contrasts his devotion to the law with Valjean's supposed decision to live a life of crime.

When Javert and Valjean meet again ten years later, Javert further expands his faith-based understanding of justice, this time in a dramatic solo number. The inn keeper Thénardier attempts to get money out of an older man and his daughter, whom he quickly identifies as Valjean and Cosette. Javert comes in and busts up the scene, hoping the old man will serve as a

⁸¹ Victor Hugo describes Javert's outlook in the original *Les Misérables* novel this way: "This man was composed of two very simple and two very good sentiments, comparatively; but he rendered them almost bad, by dint of exaggerating them,—respect for authority, hatred of rebellion; and in his eyes, murder, robbery, all crimes, are only forms of rebellion. He enveloped in a blind and profound faith every one who had a function in the state, from the prime minister to the rural policeman. He covered with scorn, aversion, and disgust every one who had once crossed the legal threshold of evil. He was absolute, and admitted no exceptions. On the one hand, he said, "The functionary can make no mistake; the magistrate is never the wrong." On the other hand, he said, "These men are irremediably lost. Nothing good can come from them." Book 5, Chapter 5 in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, translated by Isabel F. Hapgood (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1887), eBook #135 of Project Gutenberg, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/135/135-h/135-h.htm>.

⁸² In Hugo's novel, Javert's mother is a fortune teller and his father is an inmate doomed to the galleys. Javert's desire to overcome his origin story is the chief motivating factor for his moralistic character.

Figure 5: Overlapping “Confrontation” lyrics

Valjean	Javert
Believe of me what you will! There is a duty that I’m sworn to do You know nothing of my life— All I did was steal some bread. You know nothing of the world— You would sooner see me dead. But not before I see this justice done.	Men like me can never change. Men like you can never change. No. 24601, My duty’s to the law. You can have no rights. Come with me, 24601. Now the wheel has turned around, Jean Valjean is nothing now. Dare you talk to me of crime And the price you had to pay? Every man is born in sin, Every man must choose his way. You know nothing of Javert. I was born inside a gaol. I was born with scum like you, I am from the gutter, too.
I am warning you, Javert, I’m a stronger man by far. There is power in me yet, My race is not yet run. I am warning you, Javert, There is nothing I won’t dare, If I have to kill you here, I’ll do what must be done.	

witness to the crime, but discovers the man has fled. After Thénardier reveals Valjean’s identity to Javert, the inspector sings “Stars,” proclaiming his renewed commitment to capturing Valjean. Javert uses Christian references to set up binary relationships of light and darkness, good and evil, himself and Valjean. He sings, “He knows his way in the dark. / Mine is the way of the Lord.”⁸³ He describes Valjean as “out in the darkness, a fugitive running, fallen from grace,” a fall he compares to the fall of the angel Lucifer from heaven. Stars, on the other hand, like Javert, “fill the darkness with order and light,” and “are always the same.” In Javert’s view, Valjean must suffer the legal consequences for breaking his parole by going back to prison: “And so it has been and so it is written / On the doorway to paradise / That those who falter and those who

⁸³ Behr, *The Complete Book of Les Misérables*, 177.

fall / Must pay the price.”⁸⁴ He ends his song with a prayer directed directly to God, singing, “Lord, let me find him, that I may see him safe behind bars. I will never rest till then.” The idea of Valjean being “safe” behind bars reflects Javert’s sincerely held belief that Valjean is a threat to society who needs to be incarcerated.

Ultimately, Javert’s black-and-white understanding of the world leads to his own downfall. When Javert goes undercover to infiltrate the revolutionaries’ camp and is discovered as a spy, Valjean—who is fighting alongside the others—asks to be the one to take care of him. Rather than exacting revenge on Javert, Valjean has mercy on him and lets him go free. This magnanimous act is incomprehensible to Javert. While processing these events in his final solo, Javert sings, “Who is this man? / What sort of devil is he / To have my life in his hands / And choose to let me go free?”⁸⁵ This religious language of good and evil continues in later statements like, “Is he from heaven or from hell?” and “Shall his sins be forgiven? / Shall his crimes be reprieved?”⁸⁶ Forgiveness, whether legal or divine, does not register as a possibility for Javert. This moral paradox fundamentally shakes Javert’s understanding of the world (“And must I now begin to doubt / Who never doubted all these years?”). Since, as he sings, “It is either Valjean or Javert,” Javert is left with “no way to go on,” and he takes his own life by throwing himself into the Seine.

Victor Hugo uses the character of Javert to critique a moralist, black-and-white view of right and wrong as part of a broken criminal justice system. In an era of religious politics and crime policy, it would be easy to see the blind faith of Javert’s character as a critique of

⁸⁴ Behr, *The Complete Book of Les Misérables*, 177.

⁸⁵ Behr, *The Complete Book of Les Misérables*, 187.

⁸⁶ Behr, *The Complete Book of Les Misérables*, 188.

conservative Christian influence in American politics and crime policy. That is, if it were it not for an equally religious protagonist intended to celebrate the redemptive potential of Christian faith.

Born-Again Valjean

As the protagonist, Jean Valjean is the foil to Javert's antagonist, even as both men are driven by their faith. Reviewing the musical in *Time*, William Henry wrote, "Valjean believes in the forgiving God of the New Testament, Javert in the retributive God of the Old Testament. The story resounds with images of Christian redemption."⁸⁷ What Javert refuses to understand about Jean Valjean is that he can change, and has. From the moment Valjean is shown mercy by the bishop from whom he steals, he vows to live a different life, one devoted to God. Valjean's character would have appealed to evangelical Christians because his story of transformation is an example of their "born again" theology. This belief, seen as central to the evangelical movement, derives from the Gospel of John, where Jesus tells Nicodemus that no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again.⁸⁸ According to this theology, by confessing one's sins and accepting Christ as a savior, the old sinful self is washed away and a new self emerges. Valjean makes direct reference to his own "whirlpool of sin" before suggesting that "Jean Valjean is nothing now. Another story must begin." Born again Christians describe themselves as having given their lives over to Jesus Christ, with whom they maintain a relationship through prayer. In fact, public prayer, particularly in schools, was one of the most important political issues for

⁸⁷ William A. Henry III, "An Epic of the Downtrodden," *Time*, March 23, 1987.

⁸⁸ John 3:1-8.

religiously conservative Republicans, and for President Reagan, who ran as a self-described born-again Christian.

Efforts to amend the constitution to allow for school prayer had been under way since the 1960s, after the Supreme Court ruled that the practice violated the establishment clause. In *Engel v. Vitale* (1962), the court's decision held that school prayer was "wholly inconsistent" with the First Amendment's bar on government establishment of religion.⁸⁹ Almost immediately, the idea of a constitutional amendment was put forth by a broad coalition of politicians on both sides of the aisle. Democratic Senator and former KKK leader Robert Byrd of West Virginia introduced an amendment in 1962, and again in 1973, 1979, 1982, 1993, 1995, and 1997. By the 1980s, Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority had made school prayer a top priority issue for Republican politicians, including President Reagan.

In May of 1982, Reagan proposed a constitutional amendment to allow individual and group prayer in public schools and institutions. In a message to Congress, Regan wrote, "The public expression through prayer of our faith in God is a fundamental part of our American heritage and a privilege which should not be excluded by law from any American school, public or private."⁹⁰ Religious conservatives drew a direct connection between the decline of school prayer and rising crime rates. In their May 1982 issue of the *Moral Majority Report*, devoted to Reagan's amendment, one article headline read simply, "Without Prayer, Crime Up."⁹¹ The religious fervor of the 1980s was reflected in polls on the measure, which showed 80% of respondents in favor of the amendment, despite opposition from mainline Protestant and Jewish

⁸⁹ Martin Tolchin, "Amendment Drive on School Prayer Loses Senate Vote," *New York Times*, March 21, 1984.

⁹⁰ Associated Press, "Reagan Proposes School Prayer Amendment," *New York Times*, May 18, 1982.

⁹¹ Cal Thomas, "Without Prayer, Crime Up," *Moral Majority Report*, May 24, 1982.

groups.⁹² The amendment did not come up for a vote until two years later, where it lost in the Senate by a vote of 56–44 in favor, but lacking the two-thirds majority needed for an amendment. The Moral Majority called for “retribution at the polls” for the eighteen Republican senators who voted against the amendment, and Republican strategists hoped the issue would further encourage members of fundamentalist religious groups to register to vote.⁹³ As for the President, he described the loss as a setback but not a defeat of what he described as “free religious speech.” Prayer remained, for a many of American Christians, a signifier of moral rectitude.

Jean Valjean was one of these men who communicated with God directly through prayer, and ultimately had his prayers answered. One of the most poignant moments of the musical comes during the second act when Valjean has volunteered to help the young revolutionaries at the barricade. While Marius, the romantic lead who is in love with Valjean’s adopted daughter Cosette, is asleep, Valjean offers a sung prayer to God for Marius’s safe return (“Bring Him Home”). This quiet, plaintive aria sits high in Valjean’s tessitura, sung mostly in falsetto. The simple, arpeggiated accompaniment moves through a repetitive chord progression beneath a high dominant pedal tone in the strings. In the opening words, Valjean appeals directly to God, singing, “God on high, / Hear my prayer – / In my need / You have always been there.”⁹⁴ This action is taking place years after the opening Prologue where Valjean has his “born again” conversion experience. Here, Valjean is looking back on his fortune in life since that time and directly crediting God. Throughout the song, Valjean pleads for Marius’s life, even volunteering

⁹² Tolchin, “Amendment Drive.”

⁹³ Tolchin, “Amendment Drive.”

⁹⁴ Behr, *The Complete Book of Les Misérables*, 186.

his own in his place (“If I die, let me die / Let him live, bring him home”). As the piece draws to a close, he repeats the title phrase again and again, ending on a long, soft, A4 sung in quiet falsetto.

This song has become an iconic moment in the show, with some reviewers immediately naming it the show’s “best song” and the “heart” of the piece.⁹⁵ The song could be similarly adored by audiences, not only for its vocal virtuosity, but because it is a prayer. This dramatic moment is not included in Victor Hugo’s French novel; rather, the song was intentionally created for the musical to emphasize the show’s prevailing message. In fact, when “Bring Him Home” was added to the production during rehearsals in London, director Trevor Nunn told the cast, “I told you the play was all about God, that it was a deeply religious experience.”⁹⁶

Reviewers did not fail to pick up on this thread. Jack Curry wrote, “To its credit, for all its commercial appeal, Broadway’s biggest hit is also probably one of the most spiritual shows in seasons. Its final line—‘To love another person is to see the face of God’—is no throwaway curtain kicker: It’s *Les Misérables*’ entire message.”⁹⁷ Critics, who largely dismissed the musical’s music and lyrics, nevertheless praised the performance of its leading man, Colm Wilkinson, in the role of Jean Valjean, comparing him to Jesus himself. Writing for the *New York Times*, Frank Rich described Wilkinson as “an actor of pugilistic figure and dynamic voice,

⁹⁵ Allan Wallach, “*Les Misérables* Arrives as Pop Opera,” *New York Newsday*, March 1987.

⁹⁶ Sternfeld, *The Megamusical*, 183.

⁹⁷ Jack Curry, “*Les Miz* Sends Spirits Soaring,” *USA Today*, March 13, 1987. The title of Jessica Sternfeld’s chapter on *Les Misérables* in *The Megamusical* also uses this quote from the show’s finale.

he is the heroic everyman the show demands at its heart—convincingly brawny, Christlike without being cloying, enraged by injustice, paternal with children.”⁹⁸

Other reviewers made the connection between the subject matter and the politics of the 1980s. David Lida wrote, “Hugo’s book was inspired by the July Revolution of 1830, which was indeed started by students and the liberal bourgeoisie against an oppressive government that favored the rich. One hundred and fifty years later, with many people feeling increasingly disenfranchised by government and big business, revolution seems a perfect topic for theater.”⁹⁹ Jack Curry suggested that despite being of French and British origin, “the play’s theme of liberty struggling against oppression strikes home here [in America].”¹⁰⁰ And yet, other critics noted how the musical’s sweeping, broad brush strokes and relative political ambiguity made it uniquely appealing to all potential audiences. Its critique of the police and black-and-white religious morality is potentially softened by its celebration of the power of faith in God to redeem those who are lost. In his review for *Time* magazine, William Henry puts it best:

Les Misérables is a melodrama inflamed with outrage. Its politics always matter more than its love stories. . . .Novelist Hugo’s chase story between good and evil—with good ironically represented by a runaway convict and evil by a zealot of a policeman—has captivated audiences from the moment it was published in 1862. . . .[but] the nature of the intended revolution remains more than a little sketchy. . . .This lack of ideology may enhance the show’s appeal: it taps generalized populist sentiment without bogging down in debate.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Frank Rich, “*Misérables*, Musical Version Opens on Broadway,” *New York Times*, March 13, 1987.

⁹⁹ David Lida, “*Les Misérables* – A Review,” *Women’s Wear Daily*, March 13, 1987.

¹⁰⁰ Jack Curry, “*Les Miz* Sends Spirits Soaring,” *USA Today*, March 13, 1987.

¹⁰¹ Henry, “An Epic of the Downtrodden.”

Ultimately, the musical won eight Tony Awards, including for its score and book, along with the top prize of Best Musical. Audiences would continue to connect with the musical *Les Misérables* across the country and all over the world for decades to come.

Conclusion: Race, Religion, and the Megamusical Hero

The 1980s was a decade during which the American political zeitgeist was primarily concerned with promoting conservative Christian values and cracking down on crime. Members of Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority found sympathetic ears everywhere from Congress to the White House, and they brought their values with them to New York City, where efforts to clean up Times Square were encouraging families to visit the theater district and see a show. Chief among the options available to those tourists were flashy, epic megamusicals that spoke to the present moment in striking ways, and showed them the functional criminal justice system they wanted to see, where white men who put their faith in God, though unjustly persecuted, are ultimately exonerated and lead happy, fulfilling lives. The problem of mass incarceration in the United States would only continue to grow during the rest of the 1980s, throughout the 1990s, and into the new millennium. But then, so would the success and popularity of these musicals.

While the themes and storylines of megamusicals like *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* and *Les Misérables* certainly resonated with a broader political concern with crime and religion, there was one glaring difference between the protagonists Joseph and Valjean and the individuals most impacted by Reagan's Drug War: the color of their skin. As Black and Latino Americans were being convicted of drug crimes at disproportionate rates, the public image of a drug criminal also became associated with these demographics. As white men, Joseph and Valjean represented sympathetic heroes redeemed through their faith, a redemption

arc storyline palatable and largely available only to white, upper-middle-class audiences. By casting white men in these roles and elevating their faith-based narratives, these musicals succeeded in obliquely referencing the tough-on-crime cultural moment without becoming overtly political or directly indicting the conservative political ideologies responsible for the increase in American incarceration.

This racial dynamic has been confirmed again and again through the casting choices for these roles. In every major production of *Joseph*, the title character has unfailingly been portrayed by a white actor. In the 1982 Tanner production, not only was Joseph white (played by Bill Hutton), but he sported a head of bright blonde hair, even after subsequent replacements. When Joseph sings “Close Every Door,” the stark whiteness of his skin and loin cloth stands out, illuminated by a spotlight on an otherwise dark stage. *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* toured the nation after its original Broadway run, reaching audiences across the United States. At the same time, a U.K. tour was launched by director Bill Kenwright that ran for more than twenty years, setting a Guinness record for longest-running touring production, one that was viewed by over 15 million people.¹⁰² This international popularity resulted in a U.K. in the early 1990s and another Broadway production in 1993–94. In 1999, American pop icon and former teen idol Donny Osmond starred as Joseph in a direct-to-video film adaptation, and the U.K. hosted a reality tv show called *Any Dream Will Do* to choose its next Joseph in the 2000s.

¹⁰² Paul Webb, “From Dreamboat to *Dreamcoat*: Stephen Gately Stars in Lloyd Webber’s *Joseph*,” *Playbill.com*, February 12, 2003. <https://playbill.com/article/from-dreamboat-to-dreamcoat-stephen-gately-stars-in-lloyd-webbers-joseph-com-111529>.

Of the twelve contestants, the only non-white actor—Johndeeep More, who is Middle Eastern—was eliminated in the second episode.¹⁰³

Les Misérables became an immediate international sensation. By November 1988, just eighteen months after the Broadway opening, three different touring productions had been established in the United States. By 1991, there were international productions in Japan, Israel, Hungary, Budapest, Australia, Iceland, Norway, Austria, Spain, Sweden, Mexico, France, and the Netherlands.¹⁰⁴ After the original Broadway production of *Les Misérables* finished its twenty-six-year run, it was revived only three years later in 2006, made into a major motion picture in 2012, and revived again on Broadway in 2014, all while robust national tours continued bringing the show to local audiences across the country. Throughout these various productions, and despite an assortment of diverse casting choices for other roles such as the lower-class women Fantine and Eponine as well as the villain Javert, a Black actor did not perform the role of Jean Valjean on Broadway until 2015, nearly 30 years after the musical's debut, when understudy Kyle Jean-Baptiste briefly assumed the role for only a couple of performances.¹⁰⁵ This seemingly willful resistance to casting a Black actor in the heroic role perhaps speaks to an audience base who were conditioned by news media and criminal policies that associated the harshest crimes with people of color. In any case, the particular combination

¹⁰³ “Where are They Now? *Any Dream Will Do!*,” Pocketsize Theatre, September 7, 2014. Accessed October 15, 2022. <http://www.pocketsizetheatre.com/2014/09/where-are-they-now-any-dream-will-do.html>

¹⁰⁴ Edward Behr discusses the domestic and international production history of *Les Misérables* in *The Complete Book of Les Misérables*, 140–158. Jessica Sternfeld discusses the musical's global reach and impact in *The Megamusical*, 217–24.

¹⁰⁵ Michael Gioia, “21 Year Old Makes Broadway History As Youngest and First African-American Jean Valjean,” Playbill.com, July 26, 2015. <https://playbill.com/article/21-year-old-makes-broadway-history-as-youngest-and-first-african-american-jean-valjean-com-354378>.

of crime, punishment, and faith in *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* and *Les Misérables* makes these pieces endlessly relevant in a country with the highest incarceration rate in the world, and where the Religious Right remains an important constituency in local and national politics.

Chapter 2

“I Never Touched that Child”:

Sex Crimes on Broadway in the 1990s

“I did not have sexual relations with that woman.”

– President Bill Clinton, January 26, 1998.

“I never touched that girl.”

–Leo Frank, *Parade*, opened December 17, 1998

In the spring of 1999, NBC announced a new show joining its fall primetime lineup, a spin-off of the already enormously successful *Law & Order* franchise. The show had become a cultural phenomenon since its debut in 1990 and was already airing so many reruns that critics joked it should have its own channel.¹ The new iteration, called *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, would focus exclusively on sex crimes, particularly those against women and children, and the New York City detectives who investigate them. In an interview with the *New York Times* in September 1999, show creator and executive producer Dick Wolf explained that his interest in sexually motivated crimes dated back to a notorious case from the late 1980s, when Robert Chambers raped and murdered his 18-year-old girlfriend Jennifer Levin and left her body in Central Park. The media widely publicized the harrowing case, dubbing Chambers the “Preppy Killer” or “Central Park Strangler” and publishing intimate details of the couple’s sex life. After dramatizing a version of the case in the first season of the original *Law & Order*, Dick Wolf said

¹ Caryn James, “Sex Crimes Featured in a Spinoff of Top Series,” *New York Times*, September 20, 1999.

he “wanted to get deeper into the psychology of crimes like that, the role of human sexuality.”² Like the original *Law & Order*, the basic structure of each episode begins with a unique crime (in this case, sexual in nature), followed by an investigation by the Manhattan Special Victims Unit of the NYPD, usually an arrest, and often a courtroom trial. The case is typically, though not always, resolved in the course of the episode. Since its debut, *Law & Order: SVU* has gone on to air twenty-six seasons as of 2024, making it the longest-running primetime live-action television series in American television history.

The arrival of *SVU* at the end of the 1990s represented the culmination of a decade during which American society had become gripped by a fear of sex crimes, particularly those against minors, thanks to a spate of highly publicized crimes of this nature. The news media routinely covered these crimes and their perpetrators, recounting their salacious details and closely following their court proceedings. The public outcry against such crimes was a major driving force in local, state, and federal politics during the 1990s, couched within broader “tough-on-crime” rhetoric that had been popular since the Nixon administration.

In *Virtual Pedophilia: Sex Offender Profiling and U.S. Security Culture*, Gillian Harkins establishes a “genealogy” of pedophilia in America throughout the twentieth century as the idea progressed from deviant psycho-sexual typology to criminal predatory profile. A major turning point in this evolution occurred during the 1980s and 1990s, when “various strands of sexual advocacy split focus between normalization of homosexuality and the criminalization of

² Hugo Lindgren, “The Way We Live Now: 9-12-99: Questions for Dick Wolf; Cop Show and Tell,” *New York Times*, September 20, 1999.

pedophilia.”³ Harkins explains how the criminalization and prosecution of adult-child sexual activity contributed to the mass incarceration epidemic in the United States:

From the 1980s to the 2010s, the term “pedophile” was used more and more often to describe the threat to children posed by sexual predators, regardless of the diagnostic or even forensic relevance of the term. These new monsters—pedophiles whose predatory nature needed to be discerned among the otherwise seemingly normal population of white men—created an overtly white focus on the legal category of sex offenders and a covert dragnet gathering people of color. During these years, the number of people arrested, incarcerated, committed, or registered as “sex offenders” grew exponentially, second only to individuals targeted in the War on Drugs. Scholars and pundits agree that the vast expansion of sex offense lawmaking, policing, and punishment contributed centrally to the emergence of the prison-industrial complex and its neoliberal corollary, the carceral state.⁴

At the same time, the American public was becoming obsessed with crime, both real and fictional, on television. Viewers were flooded with reality police shows such as *Cops* (1988), procedural dramas like *Law & Order* (1990), and even the short-lived musical show *Cop Rock* (1990). Capitalizing on this insatiable appetite for crime television, Steven Brill, founder of the monthly legal magazine *The American Lawyer*, created Court TV in 1991, a network devoted solely to crime-themed programming, including live televised coverage of high-profile cases. Court TV surged in popularity after carrying the proceedings of the Menendez Brothers and O. J. Simpson trials. By the late-1990s, the American news media was flooded with coverage of the sexual misconduct allegations against President Bill Clinton, recounting the salacious facts of the case in graphic detail. Clinton’s resulting impeachment in 1998 was one of the biggest news stories of the century.

³ Gillian Harkins, *Virtual Pedophilia: Sex Offender Profiling and U.S. Security Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 26.

⁴ Harkins, *Virtual Pedophilia*, 64.

This chapter considers how Broadway creatives in the 1990s responded to the cultural zeitgeist regarding sex crimes, particularly those against minors, by mounting new musical productions in which sex crimes were a central element of the plot. In the span of just five years, director Harold Prince—who described the kinds of musicals he wanted to do as “dangerous”—would bring two original musicals to Broadway, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1993) and *Parade* (1998), where the leading man is convicted and incarcerated for committing a sex crime against a minor, though both under false or unjust pretenses.⁵ These musicals complicate the archetype of the white male protagonist at odds with the law established the 1980s in musicals like *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* and *Les Misérables* by adding the element of a marginalized identity for these leading men, whose status as “other” isolates them from society and makes them scapegoats for their alleged crimes. In Kander and Ebb’s *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, Molina’s homosexuality ostracizes him from the rest of the hypermasculine prison culture, prompting him to escape through fantasy and diva worship. In Jason Robert Brown’s *Parade*, Leo Frank is a New York Jew in the Bible Belt of the Deep South, making him an easy target for politicians and the media when one of his young employees is raped and murdered. Unlike the Christian protagonists of the 1980s, neither of these men, both played by actor Brent Carver, survive to the end of the musical.

Despite both musicals winning Tony Awards for Best Original Score and Best Book, neither received the critical acclaim and popularity of other contemporary musicals, particularly for a period in which commercial success was measured against the British megamusicals that had been running for more than a decade with no end in sight. While many critics and scholars

⁵ Harold Prince, “What is Hal Princeness,” interview by André Bishop, *Lincoln Center Theater Review* no. 20 (Fall 1998), 6.

have pointed to the structural, developmental, and financial shortcomings of these productions, I suggest another reason that audiences struggled to connect with the material. On one hand, these male protagonists are framed for their crimes as a result of their marginalized identities, eliciting sympathy from the audience. On the other, the seriousness and prevalence of these crimes were so present in the minds of the American public that the dissonance between these two competing ideas ultimately left audiences cold.

Sex Crimes in U.S. Politics

President Reagan's "tough on crime" political rhetoric of the 1980s extended beyond his War on Drugs to a host of other criminal activities, particularly those that could be linked to issues of concern for religious conservatives. One such issue was criminal sex acts, particularly child sexual assault. News, television, and film media were increasingly bringing these stories into the public imagination, and one early case would set up the rest of Reagan's presidential term. In 1981, six-year-old Adam Walsh was taken from a Florida department store and was later found dead, instantly becoming the face of a movement for missing children that would last into the twenty-first century. In response to growing concerns over child safety, Reagan founded the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), an agency formed in direct response to the abduction and murder of Adam Walsh. During the ceremony marking the NCMEC's inauguration on June 13, 1984, President Reagan said, "Our commitment to criminal justice goes far deeper than a desire to punish the guilty. Our laws represent the collective moral voice of a free society. And right now that voice is crying out to protect our children and keep them safe. . . . We must and will continue cracking down on career criminals, drug-pushers, and the pornographers. We must and will continue working to protect the interests of our children

and their families.”⁶ Embedded in Reagan’s remarks are the hallmarks of Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority and the conservative Christian values that had helped get him elected four years prior. In this speech, Reagan links the fight to protect children from abduction to sexual immorality and his War on Drugs.

Sex crimes were a key issue in keeping Republicans in the White House into the 1990s. During the 1988 presidential campaign, Republican nominee and current Vice President George H. W. Bush seized on a sensational and highly-publicized sex crime to malign his Democratic opponent, Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis, by running a now infamous political attack ad centered on convicted felon Willie Horton. Horton, a Black man who had robbed and murdered a minor in the 1970s and was serving a life sentence without the possibility of parole, was temporarily released on a weekend furlough program, during which he fled and went into hiding. He subsequently broke into the home of an engaged couple, raping the woman and torturing her fiancé. The Bush ad framed Dukakis’s support of weekend furlough programs as indicative of his stance on crime policy, despite the fact that all fifty states had similar programs at that time.⁷ The success of the Willie Horton ad in aiding Bush’s victory in 1988 taught Democrats that in order to win elections, they needed to mirror the “tough-on-crime” rhetoric of Republicans.⁸

⁶ Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at a White House Ceremony Marking the Opening of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children,” Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum archives, June 13, 1984. <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-white-house-ceremony-marking-opening-national-center-missing-and-exploited>.

⁷ Beth Schwartzapfel and Bill Keller, “Willie Horton Revisited,” The Marshall Project, published May 13, 2015, <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2015/05/13/willie-horton-revisited>.

⁸ Peter Baker, “Bush Made Willie Horton an Issue in 1988, and the Racial Scars Are Still Fresh,” *New York Times*, December 3, 2018.

The popular notoriety of criminal sex acts prompted legislative action at the state and federal congressional level. During this period, a series of landmark sex offender policies were enacted, creating the first national mandates for sex offender registration and community notification (RCNLs), where local residents would be made aware of a perpetrator in their neighborhood. Most of these are so-called “memory laws,” named after real-life child victims to commemorate their tragic loss of life as a result of a crime. Washington State’s pioneering Community Protection Act of 1990 was the first comprehensive set of laws regulating the management, supervision, and commitment of sex offenders. Among its fourteen sections, it included America’s first community notification statute, as well as a provision for civil commitment of sexual predators.⁹ Four years later, Congress passed the Jacob Wetterling Crimes Against Children and Sexually Violent Offender Registration Act of 1994, which required all states to create a registry for offenders convicted of sexual offenses against children. In 1996, Congress passed two subsection expansions of the Wetterling Act, including Megan’s Law—mandating that states notify residents about sex offenders in the community—and the Pam Lychner Sexual Offender Tracking and Identification Act—which established a national FBI database to track the whereabouts of all who have been convicted of a crime against a minor or of a sexually violent crime. Finally, the Protection of Children from Sexual Predators Act of 1998 specified offenses regarding child trafficking and child pornography.

Amid the horror of these crimes there was a growing interest among the public and law enforcement to understand the psychological motivations for these crimes and their perpetrators. During the 1980s and 1990s, the Federal Bureau of Investigation was profiling sex criminals in

⁹ Karen J. Terry and Alissa R. Ackerman, “A Brief History of Major Sex Offender Laws,” in *Sex Offender Laws: Failed Policies, New Directions*, 2nd ed., ed. Richard Wright (New York: Springer, 2015), 56.

attempt to create a manual for identifying and apprehending them. The FBI's Behavioral Science Unit, supervised by Special Agent Kenneth V. Lanning, in conjunction with Reagan's National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, published a report titled *Child Molesters: A Behavioral Analysis*. The document is marketed as being intended "for law-enforcement officers investigating cases of child sexual exploitation." The FBI published three editions of the manual between 1986 and 1992. Among the key findings of the report was notion that sex offenders were predominantly men and "pedophiles who targeted young boys...committed the greatest number of crimes."¹⁰ This aligned with some notorious and highly-publicized cases from this era. Jeffrey Dahmer, infamous sex offender and murderer of at least seventeen men and boys, was arrested in 1991 and underwent a highly-publicized trial in 1992. Dahmer's reported inspiration, serial murderer John Wayne Gacy, who victimized at least thirty-three men and boys in the 1980s, was executed in 1994.¹¹

The broad publicity of adult men committing sex crimes against underage boys added fuel to the pervasive belief that gay men were pedophiles. This idea, which had already been widely disseminated by Anita Bryant's "Save Our Children" campaign during the 1970s, was

¹⁰ Kenneth V. Lanning, *Child Molesters: A Behavioral Analysis*, 3rd ed (Quantico, VA: Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1992), 15.

¹¹ It was during the 1990s that some began to speak out against sex abuse against boys by clergy in the Catholic Church, such as when Sinéad O'Connor tore up a photograph of Pope John Paul II on *Saturday Night Live* in a moment of performative activism. While considered as a fringe viewpoint at the time, subsequent retrospectives have hailed O'Connor (later known as Shuhada' Sadaqat) as being ahead of the press, the Church, and the public on this issue that would explode in the early 2000s following John Paul II's public apology and subsequent *Boston Globe* Spotlight reporting. See Jon Caramanica, "The Night Sinead O'Connor Took on the Pope on *SNL*," *New York Times*, July 23, 2023.

exacerbated by the HIV/AIDS epidemic that brought new stigma to the gay male community.¹² Historian Heather Murray writes that, “Within the public imagination, AIDS added a dimension of a frightening, visible disease to an already entrenched New Right notion that homosexuality was unnatural.”¹³ The New Right quickly recognized AIDS as a vehicle to whip up hysteria and move its political agenda forward.¹⁴ Conservative media such as Jerry Falwell’s *Moral Majority Report* portrayed homosexuals as threats to American children and families. States called for the reinstatement of anti-sodomy laws and conservative politicians floated the idea of quarantining carriers and high-risk groups in camps. The military imposed mandatory testing and Congress enacted legislation requiring the test for all immigrants.

Kiss of the Spider Woman (1993)

It was against the backdrop of AIDS and the national focus on sex crimes that *Kiss of the Spider Woman* came into being. The musical is an adaptation of the 1976 experimental political novel of the same title by Argentinian author Manuel Puig. Set entirely in a prison, the story is that of two cellmates: Molina, a gay man who has been convicted of “corrupting a minor,” and Valentin, a straight, leftist political dissident. The novel clearly resonated with many in the 1980s, as it was adapted into both a stage play in London and a major motion picture in 1985.

¹² See Gillian Harkins, *Virtual Pedophilia*, 58–59. See also Lillian Faderman, “How Anita Bryant Advanced Gay and Lesbian Rights,” Part 6 in *The Gay Revolution: The Story of the Struggle*, 319–89 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015).

¹³ Heather Murray, *Not in This Family: Gays and the Meaning of Kinship in Postwar North America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 137.

¹⁴ John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 354.

The film was nominated for several Academy Awards, including Best Picture, and earned an Oscar for actor William Hurt in the role of Molina.

Broadway composer and lyricist team John Kander and Fred Ebb, both gay men themselves, saw the potential for the story to be made into a musical. James Leve has shown how this composer and lyricist duo were drawn to more serious subjects in their work, writing that their previous collaborations such as *Cabaret* (1966) and *Chicago* (1975) had walked “the line between the cold reality of life and the comforting illusion of theater.”¹⁵ They asked Hal Prince, who had directed *Cabaret* and was similarly drawn to darker, more serious topics in his theater pieces, to direct the show. Though the team initially worked with author Manuel Puig on the script for the musical adaptation, artistic differences regarding the focus of the piece led to Terrence McNally being brought on as the book writer. In an attempt to appeal to North American Broadway audiences, the resulting piece heightened the homophobic content and focused much more on the relationship between the two men, while skirting the more complex gender, political, and ethnic dynamics of the original story and its characters.¹⁶

In a 1993 episode of the American Theatre Wing’s *Working in the Theatre*, host and moderator Isabelle Stevenson interviewed the creative team along with actress Chita Rivera about the process of bringing *Kiss of the Spider Woman* to Broadway.¹⁷ Director Hal Prince mentions the 1986 British television musical series *The Singing Detective* as inspiration for the magical realism approach to Puig’s novel. The six-episode BBC miniseries was a jukebox

¹⁵ James Leve, *Kander and Ebb* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 151.

¹⁶ Leve, *Kander and Ebb*, 153–154.

¹⁷ *Working in the Theater: Producing Kiss of the Spider Woman*, American Theater Wing, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Billy Rose Theatre Division, Theatre on Film and Tape Archive, NCOX 1786.

musical that infused 1940s popular songs into a narrative where a hospitalized mystery writer works out the plot to his novel during fever-induced visions coupled with flashbacks to his childhood in rural England. The British series was also the chief inspiration for Steven Bochco's ABC series *Cop Rock*, the "most outlandish television show" turned failed "experiment" during the 1990 primetime season.¹⁸ Described as an "effort to tell a cop-shop story with the tools of a Broadway musical" *Cop Rock* was a made-for-TV musical crime drama where "criminals rapped, officers sang, and jurors announced their verdict by bursting into a rousing gospel tune."¹⁹ The show was canceled after only eleven episodes. Despite its failure, the musical television show earned an Emmy for composer Randy Newman who wrote the show's theme song ("Under the Gun"), along with five songs for the pilot.²⁰ Though its execution may not have been a success, the concept of a crime musical hybrid is not hard to imagine in 1990 given the commercial success and popularity of the hyper-marketed Broadway megamusicals of the 1980s and the growing interest in crime drama (Dick Wolf's *Law & Order* debuted on NBC in the fall of 1990, alongside *Cop Rock*).

At the very same time, Broadway creatives were trying to musicalize prison using a more conventional medium: the theater. *Kiss of the Spider Woman* is somewhat notorious for the circuitous path it took to Broadway. The first production in the spring of 1990 was part of an out-of-town incubation program at SUNY Purchase called New Musicals. Devised by producing director Martin J. Bell, New Musicals was originally intended to produce four new musicals each

¹⁸ Steve Weinstein, "Will Singing Cops Be Heard?" *Los Angeles Times*, September 16, 1990. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-09-16-ca-1279-story.html>.

¹⁹ Neil Genzlinger, "*Cop Rock*: How a Legendary Failure Predicted TV's Future," *New York Times*, May 13, 2016.

²⁰ Brenna Ehrlich, "That Time Randy Newman Wrote the Theme for a Musical Cop Show," *Rolling Stone*, February 5, 2020.

year for four years, free from the scrutiny of the New York press, audiences, and funding concerns.²¹ The creative team for *Spider Woman* were provided with a \$1.5 million budget and were free to create new theater without the commercial pressure to pay back investors. Director Harold Prince was delighted to be working on an experimental piece akin to those on which he had cut his teeth earlier in his career without the modern “pressures that encumber the spirit” when working on Broadway.²²

Most importantly, the show was intended to be shielded from New York theater critics with the understanding that it was a work in progress. Nevertheless, the *New York Times* sent theater critic Frank Rich and published his lukewarm review of the piece,²³ along with a brief accompanying disclaimer on the same page explaining their choice to publish the review despite protestations by representatives of New Musicals.²⁴ Whether the result of Rich’s review or not, underwhelming ticket sales for *Kiss of the Spider Woman* at SUNY Purchase ultimately led New Musicals to disband after its one and only production.²⁵ Nevertheless, after subsequent productions in Toronto and London, and the crucial addition of seasoned Broadway star Chita Rivera in the title role, the show was ready for Broadway.

Kiss of the Spider Woman is decidedly a musical about the horrors of prison. The most striking physical reminders are the sets and projections designed by Jerome Sirlin. *Kiss of the*

²¹ Mervyn Rothstein, “Aim of New Project is to Foster Musicals,” *New York Times*, January 31, 1990.

²² Mervyn Rothstein, “Off Broadway (Way, Way Off), a Tuneful *Spider Woman* Is On,” *New York Times*, April 26, 1990.

²³ Frank Rick, “In a Prison Cell, 2 Men and a Movie Musical,” *New York Times*, June 1, 1990.

²⁴ “Reviewed Over Protest,” *New York Times*, June 1, 1990. Uncredited editorial.

²⁵ Mervyn Rothstein, “New Musicals Project Closes Down,” *New York Times*, July 31, 1990.

Spider Woman was Sirlin's first (and only) foray into Broadway musical set and projection design, but he came to the project having worked on a wide-ranging list of other projects for the musical stage from pop to opera, including Madonna's 1987 concert tour (*Who's That Girl*), a complete staging of Richard Wagner's *Ring* cycle staged at the Artpark Amphitheater at Niagara Falls between 1986 and 1989, and operas by Philip Glass including *1000 Airplanes on the Roof* (1988) and *Hydrogen Jukebox* (1990/1991). Some critics felt that Sirlin's production designs, particularly his use of projections, were a gimmick. In a profile for the *New York Times*, John Rockwell sniped that Sirlin's work had garnered "disproportionate attention," whereby "his contributions almost always [earned] more awed attention than the work of the composer, conductor and performers."²⁶ For *Kiss of the Spiderwoman*, Sirlin created a multi-story set of prison cells with layers of prison bars that could be in front of or behind the actors at various points, as well as projections onto a scrim in front of the actors. In an interview for the American Theatre Wing, actress Chita Rivera said one of the shortcomings of the SUNY Purchase tryout (before her involvement) had to do with the size of the theater: "The theater is enormous, you wanted to feel as if you were in this confined area."²⁷ Sirlin's sets seemed to strike the right balance on Broadway. In a review for the *Daily News*, which otherwise deemed the production as "flawed," Doug Watt wrote that "it's the prison scenes—not the Spider Woman's—that have the sting."²⁸

²⁶ John Rockwell, "The Wonderworld of a Stage Designer Who Defies Reality," *New York Times*, May 5, 1991.

²⁷ *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, filmed July 28, 1993, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Billy Rose Theatre Division, Theatre on Film and Tape Archive, NCOV 1543.

²⁸ Doug Watt, "*Spider Woman* Fascinating but Flawed Kander & Web," *Daily News*, May 7, 1993.

Molina's identity as both a homosexual and a sex criminal is made explicitly known to the audience from the very beginning of the musical. During the opening, each of the two cell mates are introduced to the audience by the Prison Warden, who—while also playing a literal character in the musical—fills a theatrical role similar to the Emcee roles in both *Cabaret* and *Chicago*, previous collaborations between Kander and Ebb. The Warden states the name, age, and crime of each prisoner. After introducing Valentin, two guards throw him into the cell with Molina, calling Molina “you little queer,” and suggesting Valentin is his “type.”²⁹ The scene then freezes as the Warden announces: “Prisoner 57884. Name—Luis Alberto Molina. Age 37. Sexual offender. Arrested for corrupting a minor. Male. Serving third year of eight-year sentence.”³⁰ This pronouncement at the top of the show foregrounds Molina's supposed crime in the minds of the audience, a motif that recurs and is expanded on as the musical proceeds.

In an early scene where Molina is prying about Valentin's girlfriend, Valentin chides Molina for “molesting minors in some men's room,” to which Molina retorts, “I didn't know he was a minor! When he smiled at me, I thought he was smiling at someone else. Men like me don't get smiled at a lot. But he kept smiling. So I smiled back. I followed him right into a trap. And it wasn't a men's room. It was a coffee bar.”³¹ Despite the constant onslaught of physical bullying and slurs lobbed at him by the guards throughout the musical, Molina never defends himself, but instead reinforces their characterization of him through dismissive, self-deprecating

²⁹ Terrence McNally, Fred Ebb, and John Kander, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (New York: Samuel French, 1992), 8.

³⁰ McNally et al., *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, 9.

³¹ McNally et al., *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, 27.

humor. When the Warden suggests that Molina might be falling in love with his cellmate Valentin, Molina retorts: “Darling, I like minors, remember?”³²

Yet at the same time that Molina’s alleged criminal or predatory behavior is reinforced, the writers seek to frame Molina as a sympathetic outsider who is at odds with the hypermasculine prison culture in which he finds himself and from which he tries so desperately to escape. After being introduced to the audience by the Warden, Molina calls out for Aurora, the film actress with whom he is so enamored, who is also the Spider Woman. He begins the musical number “Her Name is Aurora” accompanied by soft tremolos and harp arpeggios, transporting him (and the audience) into a fantasy world of beauty and grace embodied by Aurora. On the original cast recording, Brent Carver as Molina introduces Aurora to the audience using a soft, sweet, slightly breathy tone, singing, “Her name is Aurora / And she is so beautiful. / No man who has met her / Can ever forget her, / They’re madly in love.”³³ In the glamorous Hollywood-style Latin number that follows Molina’s introduction, Aurora appears in a bathtub, attended by a chorus of male servants. She sings of visiting a fortune teller who tells her that she will meet a handsome man, the “love of her life,” who would sweep her away—mirroring how Valentin has just been thrown into the cell with Molina. When the number ends, Valentin groans in pain, and Molina rushes to attend to him, saying “I’ll tell you about my Aurora. I’ll tell you her movies, her wonderful movies! We’ll be friends. I need a friend. My name is Molina. You can trust me.”

³² McNally et al., *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, 56.

³³ McNally et al., *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, 9.

John Clum has classified *Kiss of the Spider Woman* as the last of a long line of “diva musicals” in the twentieth century, in which female protagonists are celebrated along with the composer-lyricists who create them.³⁴

As the drag queen sees becoming the diva as an escape from an oppressive life into magic, the diva musical is about a woman’s escape from the humdrum. . . .The diva fights for liberation from stasis in a grim, everyday world. To closeted gay men, the diva heroine was a figure of identification. Where does one find magic if one is different and must try to hide one’s difference? The ideal is escape from the provincial, where one is hated, and fabulousness, an antidote to grayness and the strong sense of entrapment. In the process the diva gains glamour and power. . . .As gay men responded to the divas who sang these battle cries, they cheered the musicals that contained them.³⁵

In *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, Clum writes that, “Aurora is a floating signifier in the musical. She represents the escape into fantasy that is the allure of movies and that allows Molina to keep his sanity in prison.”³⁶ The irony is that Molina is venerating heterosexual romance (originally Nazi propaganda in the novel), and that “the political assumptions of these romances [are] the same assumptions that drive the police state that has imprisoned him.”³⁷ In a strange way, in a musical that features an almost entirely male cast, all the men, both gay and straight, are fantasizing about women. As Clum writes, “After all, Valentin’s girlfriend Marta is as much a fantasy as Molina’s Aurora.”³⁸

The next scene serves to bring Molina’s fantasy of Aurora into sharper relief against the rest of the hypermasculine prison population, including his cellmate. In the song “Over the

³⁴ John Clum, *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 167.

³⁵ John Clum, *Something for the Boys*, 168.

³⁶ John Clum, *Something for the Boys*, 186.

³⁷ John Clum, *Something for the Boys*, 187.

³⁸ John Clum, *Something for the Boys*, 188.

Wall”—the first in a series of recurring reprises throughout the musical—a prisoner begins by crying out in a rhythmically free recitative, “There are big busted women / Over the wall.”³⁹ In a kind of call and response, the other inmates echo his cry (“over the wall”). The first prisoner expands on his vision, describing the women’s oiled bodies bathing on beaches. Other prisoners join the refrain with their own desires for strong rum, sunshine, baking, fishing, and farming, but ultimately returning to a unison cry of “big busted women.” The vocal quality and delivery for these solos is uniformly gruff, as though the men are growling or barking the lyrics. This macho vocal style and overt objectification of women’s bodies by the chorus of men in the prison with Molina stands in stark and immediate contrast to the glamorous idolization of Aurora in the number just before. Indeed, composer John Kander highlights this polar opposite nature by creating melodic contours for these numbers that are essentially inverses of one another (see Figure 6). The juxtaposition serves to soften the audience’s view of Molina and underscores his need to escape (mentally, if not physically).

Figure 6: Melodic Contours of “Her Name is Aurora” and “Over the Wall”

The figure displays two musical staves. The top staff, labeled 'Molina:', is in 12/8 time and features a red melodic contour line that starts with a downward curve over the first phrase and an upward curve over the second phrase. The bottom staff, labeled '1st Prisoner:', is in 4/4 time and features a single, long red melodic contour line that arches over the entire phrase. Both staves include lyrics written below the notes.

Molina:
 Her name is Au - ro - ra and she is so beau - ti - ful

1st Prisoner:
 There are big - bust-ed wo - men o - ver the wall,

³⁹ McNally et al., *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, 12.

As the prisoners' song comes to an end, a soft, sustained high note in the strings signals the arrival of the Spider Woman, whom the audience has come to understand exists only in the mind of Molina. Quietly she soothes him as she sings, "And the moon grows dimmer / At the tide's low ebb / And your breath comes faster / And you're aching to move. / But you're caught in the web..."⁴⁰ This is the first foreshadowing that, despite his fantasies, Molina will ultimately not escape his fate; he is destined for death, brought on by the kiss of the Spider Woman. Though the audience does not know it at this point, these lyrics are a kind of prelude to the full version of "The Kiss of the Spider Woman" at the end of the musical as Molina is being murdered by the Warden.

Beyond these initial suggestions of Molina as an outsider, the musical goes on to depict brutally explicit acts of anti-gay bullying against him. The use of the word "faggot" occurs many times throughout the musical. Early on, after Molina's introductory song "Dressing them Up" about his career as a window dresser, Valentin sings, "Don't ever dare to dream that you'll ever be some fairy friend of mine," and calls him a "ridiculous faggot window dresser."⁴¹ Soon after, when their argument draws the attention of a couple of prison guards, the guards make snide comments about Molina's sexual preferences, to which Molina attempts to respond proudly by saying "You're not man enough to give it to me."⁴² This sets off the guards who then force Molina to repeat the phrase "I'm a piece of shit" multiple times in what is apparently a recurring routine, as Molina pleads "please don't make me [finish it]." Coerced by the guard, Molina says,

⁴⁰ McNally et al., *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, 13.

⁴¹ McNally et al., *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, 17–18

⁴² This scene and the lines quoted in the sentences that follow takes place on page 19 of the script.

“I’m a faggot piece of shit and anytime you want me, I’m here.” The other guard refers to Molina with female pronouns as he tells Valentin, “Anytime you want her, she’s all yours.”

The use of the f-slur bookends the musical and is among the last words Molina hears before his murder. During the finale, as Molina is recaptured and brought back to the prison for interrogation about aiding Valentin on the outside, the Warden intimidates him by counting to three, after which he yells, “Talk you fucking faggot or I’ll blow your fucking head off.”⁴³ At this point, Molina simply says “I love you” to Valentin and the Warden pulls the trigger. The gunshot serves as the downbeat for the final number, a glamorous, Hollywood-style music number like the kind we have seen performed by Aurora, only with Molina as the star (“Only in the Movies”). As the prisoners come onstage and help dress Molina in white tie and tails, the scene transforms to a movie theater with the full company in the audience. Molina sings about how “optimistic endings” are “only in the movies.” Toward the end of the number, Molina begins singing directly to Valentin, who joins him onstage. Molina sings, “Everything changed when I met you / I find I walk in technicolor now.”⁴⁴ At this point, the prison Warden’s voice rings out with his final, violent line and the audience hears the gunshot again. Though the company shushes the Warden, the stage directions instruct, “*Molina’s head jerks back. He “dies” again. Valentin lifts Molina’s head, cradling it in his arms.*”⁴⁵ As the company repeatedly sings, “His name was Molina”—harkening back to Molina’s introductory song about Aurora—the Spider Woman’s music begins, she rises to join Molina onstage, and they share the kiss of death as the company cheers before the final blackout.

⁴³ McNally et al., *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, 91.

⁴⁴ McNally et al., *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, 93.

⁴⁵ McNally et al., *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, 93.

In *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, Kander and Ebb sought to speak out against anti-gay sentiment in the United States by portraying Molina as a victim. Molina's humble and generous actions, coupled with the blatant homophobia, bullying, and violence against him throughout the piece, clearly elicit sympathy from the audience. Molina is portrayed as a compassionate and misunderstood outsider who uses flippant humor and fantasy to survive the emotional and physical violence he faces as a gay man, at a time when AIDS was devastating an entire generation and threatening to undo much of the progress made by the gay rights movement in the 1960s and 70s. Nevertheless, Broadway audiences in the early 1990s were being presented with regular real-life examples in the news media of male sex offenders with a preference for underage boys.

Critics, and even actor Brent Carver himself, found the role challenging amid the politics of 1993. The idea of playing a homosexual, let alone one convicted of sex with a minor, was fraught amid the sex-crime frenzy and AIDS epidemic. In a profile of Carver for the *New York Times*, interviewer Lawrence O'Toole writes, "In playing Molina, Mr. Carver is well aware of the hidden, built-in traps—of becoming identified with a particularly memorable character and of being linked in the public imagination with a gay character. Molina, in fact, was not an easy impersonation." He goes on to quote Carver, who said "I found it difficult for the first few months not to see more darkness than light in Molina."⁴⁶ Writing for the *New Yorker*, Edith Oliver called Molina "a hero with drag queen mannerisms but no I-yam-what-I-yam heroics," poking fun at the lyrics to Jerry Herman's gay pride anthem from *La Cage aux Folles* ten years earlier.⁴⁷ In the *Wall Street Journal*, Edwin Wilson referred to Molina as "an unabashed

⁴⁶ Lawrence O'Toole, "A Very Private Actor Leads at Least Two Lives Onstage," *New York Times*, May 23, 1993.

⁴⁷ Edith Oliver, "Escape Artists," *New Yorker*, May 24, 1993.

homosexual.”⁴⁸ The *New York Post* said Carver was “too stereotypically high camp to be politically correct . . . a cliché with bells on and set to music,” though ultimately described his performance as “unexpectedly moving.”⁴⁹

Beyond Molina’s character and Caver’s interpretation, critics were generally lukewarm on the production as a whole. *USA Today* said it was “not up to the standard Kander and Ebb set with *Cabaret*.”⁵⁰ *New York* magazine felt that the brutal plot would have been appropriate for a serious opera, but not a campy musical, and that instead, “its painful subject had been reduced to painfully bad taste.”⁵¹ Clive Barnes also quipped that the topic would have been better set to music by Alban Berg (referring to Berg’s dark, cerebral, and bloody opera *Wozzeck*).⁵² Others felt the piece did not go far enough. Writing for *Newsweek*, Jack Kroll drew a comparison with Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, which debuted on Broadway the same month, saying: “*Angels in America* presents the realities of gay life with no apologies. Apparently, *Spider* didn’t trust its audiences to accept the truth.”⁵³

Sex Crime Media Frenzy

The attention paid to sex crimes by presidents, legislators, and law enforcement during the 1980s and 1990s coincided with a growing societal obsession with the topic fueled by news

⁴⁸ Edwin Wilson, “Reality and Fantasy in Prison,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 5, 1993.

⁴⁹ Clive Barnes, “Kiss of Death, *Spider Woman*,” *New York Post*, May 4, 1993.

⁵⁰ David Patrick Stearns, “*Spiderwoman* [sic] Spins Ironic Fantasy from Despair,” *USA Today*, May 4, 1993.

⁵¹ John Simon, “*Kiss of the Spider Woman*,” *New York Magazine*, May 17, 1993.

⁵² Barnes, “Kiss of Death.”

⁵³ Jack Kroll, “*Kiss of the Spider Woman*,” *Newsweek*, May 17, 1993.

and television media. The story of Adam Walsh, the poster child for the movement, was quickly developed into a made-for-television movie called *Adam* that aired on NBC in 1983 and was viewed by an audience of thirty-eight million Americans.⁵⁴ The film was a narrative retelling of the events of Adam's life, abduction, and aftermath, with actors playing the roles of Adam's family members, including his parents John and Revé Walsh. It was rebroadcast in 1984 and 1985, and a sequel (*Adam: His Song Continues*) followed in 1986. Each subsequent airing featured a closing segment with a series of pictures of missing children and a phone number to call to provide information. During the 1985 broadcast, President Reagan, who had taken up the issue at the executive level, introduced the missing children segment.

Meanwhile, Adam Walsh's father, John Walsh, who stood onstage with Reagan during the opening ceremony of the NCMEC, used his son's abduction and murder as a platform to heighten awareness of the issue and ultimately to launch his own career as an anti-crime media personality. By 1986, John Walsh had testified on the issue in twenty-two states and fourteen times before Congress, using sensational language to describe America as "littered with mutilated, raped, strangled little children."⁵⁵ Walsh's image as an impassioned father seeking righteous vengeance for the death of his son endeared him to the American public.⁵⁶ In 1988, Walsh created and hosted the true-crime television series *America's Most Wanted*, which featured dramatic reenactments of crimes perpetrated by at-large criminals. The show featured a hotline as a way for viewers to call in and leave anonymous tips, essentially inviting the

⁵⁴ Diane Divoky, "Missing Tot Estimates Exaggerated," *Lodi News-Sentinel*, February 18, 1986.

⁵⁵ Diane Divoky, "Missing Tot Estimates Exaggerated," *Lodi News-Sentinel*, February 18, 1986.

⁵⁶ John Walsh identified as a crusader for justice, as evidenced by his book title, *Tears of Rage: From Grieving Father to Crusader for Justice; The Untold Story of the Adam Walsh Case* (New York: Pocket Books, 1997).

American public to become active participants in the criminal justice system. *AMW* would become the longest-running program on the Fox television network at the time of its cancellation in 2011 after twenty-four seasons. By the mid-1980s, reporting began to indicate that the figures in the media, usually supplied by the NCMEC, were often grossly exaggerated and that child abductions by strangers were extremely rare.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, television programs like *America's Most Wanted* tapped into an American obsession with crime.

In the 1990s, the genre of crime television expanded to include fictional and reality programming. *Cops* (1988) featured footage from camera crews embedded in police units as they fought crime on the streets. Dick Wolf's *Law & Order* (1990) became the quintessential procedural drama, spawning countless spin-offs and copycats. American television audiences had become obsessed with the psychological profile of serial killers and child molesters. At the same time, media coverage of sex crimes and the laws enacted to combat them led to a fear among the American public that violent offenders could be hiding in plain sight within their own communities. In 1992, the PBS docuseries *Frontline* aired an episode called "Monsters Among Us" that described itself as "a disturbing journey inside the minds and souls of violent sexual offenders."⁵⁸

During this period, courts had begun experimenting with letting news cameras into courtrooms for the first time.⁵⁹ American cable subscribers had a new inside view into the unedited reality of the criminal justice system. This inspired lawyer Steven Brill to create a new

⁵⁷ Diana Griego and Louis Kilzer, "Hysteria Inflates Estimates of Missing Children: Oft-Quoted Figures Exaggerated, Law Enforcement Officials and Experts Say," *Los Angeles Times*, September 1, 1985.

⁵⁸ Mike McLeod (director), "Monsters Among Us," Internet Archive. Accessed October 11, 2023. <https://archive.org/details/MonstersAmongUs>.

⁵⁹ Sam Howe Verhovek, "News Cameras in Courts? New York's Law Disputed," *New York Times*, May 28, 1991.

network called Court TV devoted to covering live court proceedings and commentary, beginning with the Central Park Jogger case.⁶⁰ The network's popularity surged when it subsequently covered the high-profile cases of the Menendez Brothers and O. J. Simpson in the mid-1990s. Erik and Lyle Menendez had admitted to murdering their parents in their Beverly Hills mansion in 1990, but claimed it was because they had suffered years of child sexual abuse at the hands of their father, with the silent complicity of their mother. From the moment of their arrest, the media called it a "plot fit for a movie."⁶¹ Court TV covered their eventual court appearances in 1994. The next year, Court TV covered the trial of O. J. Simpson, who was alleged to have murdered his ex-wife. Simpson's celebrity status as a former NFL player and actor made this televised Hollywood murder trial a media event that gripped the nation for most of 1995.

But perhaps the greatest sex crime media frenzy of the 1990s came in response to a case at the highest levels of American government. Bill Clinton's campaign and subsequent presidency would be continually shrouded in controversy due to accusations of sexual affairs and misconduct with several women, including those who worked for him. In January 1992, during the campaign, Bill and his wife Hilary Clinton sat for a *60 Minutes* interview following the Super Bowl, during which Clinton denied accusations by Gennifer Flowers that the two had had a twelve-year affair. He did, however, admit to "wrongdoing" and "causing pain" in his marriage, though he would not answer the specific question of infidelity.⁶² Two years later, during Clinton's first term, Paula Jones filed a lawsuit against Clinton claiming he made unwanted

⁶⁰ Jeremy Gerard, "New Cable Network Plans To Cover Jogger Trial Live," May 24, 1990.

⁶¹ Robert Reinhold, "Beverly Hills Journal; Real Life Produces Plot Fit For Movie," *New York Times*, March 14, 1990.

⁶² Dan Balz, "Clinton Concedes Marital 'Wrongdoing,'" *Washington Post*, January 27, 1992.

sexual advances toward her while he was governor of Arkansas.⁶³ As part of that investigation, which unfolded over several years, it came to light that there were also allegations of Clinton's sexual relations with White House intern Monica Lewinsky and that he had encouraged her to lie about it during the Paula Jones investigation.⁶⁴ Though Clinton initially testified under oath that he had not had sexual relations with Lewinsky, other testimony and evidence would lead Special Counsel Ken Starr to conclude that Clinton had committed perjury by denying the allegations.⁶⁵ Clinton's dishonesty resulted in his impeachment by the House of Representatives in 1998, though he was acquitted by the Senate and remained in office. Clinton's accusations were covered relentlessly by the news media, including salacious, graphic details of the sexual encounters and technical definitions of various sex acts.

Whether in the news or on television, Americans in the 1990s faced an inescapable onslaught of media content related to sex crime and its perpetrators, along with the responses of law enforcement and the criminal justice system.

***Parade* (1998)**

Hal Prince seems to have been interested in responding to this sex crime media blitz with *Parade*, which debuted in 1998, just months after the Clinton impeachment. While the supposed criminal sex act against a minor is a background plot element of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, it is

⁶³ Stephen Labaton, "Suit Accuses President of Advance," *New York Times*, May 7, 1994.

⁶⁴ John F. Harris and Dan Balz, "Clinton Forcefully Denies Affair or Urging Lies," *Washington Post*, January 27, 1998.

⁶⁵ Both CNN and the *Washington Post* maintain archival timelines of their coverage of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal. "Clinton Accused," *Washington Post*, accessed September 21, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/clinton/timeline.htm>; "Investigating the President," CNN, accessed September 21, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/1998/resources/lewinsky/>.

front and center in the case of *Parade*. With music and lyrics by a young and relatively unknown Jason Robert Brown and a book by playwright Alfred Uhry, *Parade* tells the true story of Leo Frank, a Jewish factory owner who, in 1913, was accused and convicted of raping and murdering a thirteen-year-old girl employed at his factory in Marietta, Georgia. Despite his conviction being subsequently overturned, an angry mob carried out vigilante justice by breaking Frank out of prison and lynching him. Among its many themes, the musical is a commentary on the racist, anti-Semitic bigotry of an American South clinging to the vestiges of the Confederacy, coupled with a critique of the news media's sensational coverage of crime and punishment. In many ways, the musical mirrors the kind of procedural drama made popular during this decade by television shows such as *Law & Order*. Even *New York Times* reviewer Ben Brantley described the musical's plot as "the sort that has become common fodder for socially sensitive television movies of the week."⁶⁶

Much like Molina in *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, the leading man Leo Frank (again played by actor Brent Carver) is framed as a cultural outsider early on in *Parade*. As Stacy Wolf has suggested, "Leo's otherness, his difference from everyone and everything in his world, is stressed at every turn in *Parade*, constructed at once through gender, race and ethnicity, class, and religion."⁶⁷ The opening number ("The Old Red Hills of Home") establishes the time and place, opening with a Confederate soldier leaving Georgia to fight in the Civil War in 1862 before flashing forward to 1913 in Atlanta on the day of the Confederate Memorial Parade, where their cause is being commemorated. In Scene 2, immediately following, the audience is introduced to Leo Frank and his wife Lucille who are arguing about how they will spend the

⁶⁶ Ben Brantley, "Martyr's Requiem Invokes Justice," *New York Times*, December 18, 1998.

⁶⁷ Stacy Wolf, *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 170.

holiday, which Leo calls “asinine.” They quibble over the fact that Leo is a “Yankee” from New York who works too hard, uses Yiddish phrases, and views Southerners with contempt. Scene 3 expands on Frank’s attitude toward his current work, living, and marital situation. As Leo makes his way to work, he pushes through a crowd listening to a speech by Governor John Slayton who is extolling the virtues of the Confederate veterans. Slayton’s speech is cut off by underscoring as Frank begins to sing for the first time in the show. In a number called “How Can I Call this Home,” he describes his yearning to be back in Brooklyn with people who look, talk, and think like he does. He describes Atlanta “like a foreign land” with uncivilized people who “belong in zoos.” Frank is even isolated from the local Jewish community, saying “I thought that / Jews were Jews, / But I was wrong.”⁶⁸ Similar to the Spider Woman’s eerie description of Molina as “caught in the web,” Jason Robert Brown’s lyrics highlight the inevitability of Frank’s fate. He uses the word “trapped” in three consecutive lyrics to describe his locale, his life, and his marriage. Soon after, Leo Frank would be trapped in prison, after being arrested as the alleged rapist and murderer of Mary Phagan.

Parade capitalizes on the fetishization of grief by the news media during the 1990s. The sorrow of the victim’s family and friends is leveraged to elicit sympathy and outrage, legitimizing the anger of those who seek vengeance for the death of the teenage girl. During Frank’s trial, Mary Phagan’s mother is called to the stand. In an attempt to tug at the heartstrings of the jury (and the full assembly), Dorsey holds up “a small pile of torn, ruined clothes,” all that

⁶⁸ The complete lyrics of *Parade* are printed in the accompanying booklet to the original Broadway cast recording released in 1999 by Sony Music Entertainment. According to Jason Robert Brown’s liner notes, the album was recorded the day after the closing performance of the musical, meaning it most closely resembles the Broadway production. Changes were made to the script, lyrics, and score for the national tour in 2000, which is the only published version of the script, included in Wiley Hausam, *The New American Musical: An Anthology from the End of the Century* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 2003), 229–352. The lyrics for “How Can I Call This Home?” appear on pages 10–11 of the album liner notes.

is left of the Easter Sunday outfit made for her by her mother. At the sight of the dress, Mrs. Phagan launches into a gentle waltz, almost like a lullaby. The song (“My Child Will Forgive Me”) serves to elicit sympathy for her and her daughter, while underscoring the depravity of the sexual assault and murder carried out by a foreigner. In the song, Mrs. Phagan blames herself for sending Mary to work rather than going to school. She says her child will forgive her for not protecting her from “men who are cruel,” and for “closin’ my eyes to the dangers of growing too fast.”⁶⁹ She invokes her faith in God and the afterlife, as well as bringing attention to the sexual assault, singing, “My child will be safe in the arms of the Lord, / And as pure as the day of her birth.” Mrs. Phagan’s testimony mirrors the public appearances in the media and before Congress by the likes of John Walsh, who had become the face of the crusade against child sexual abuse, abduction, and crime more broadly with his television program *America’s Most Wanted*, which had been running for ten years at the time of *Parade*’s premiere.

During the funeral procession, composer Jason Robert Brown highlights the senselessness of the crime by creating an Ivesian, bitonal sound world where the mourners sing the Southern Harmony hymn “There is a Fountain Filled with Blood” in the key of B flat while an ominous flat-VI G flat is rearticulated in the orchestra.⁷⁰ Above this uneasy hymn, the spoken words of a news reporter paint a picture of the scene, focusing on the small size of the coffin and young age of the victim and her mourners. Later, Mary’s friends and family interject with remembrances of the young girl, focusing on her laugh, her smile, and the simple pleasures she

⁶⁹ *Parade* cast album liner notes, 18.

⁷⁰ The original Broadway playbill actually cites the hymn in the list of musical numbers. Under *Parade*’s “There is a Fountain / It Don’t Make Sense” the following is printed: “[incorporating ‘There is a Fountain,’ traditional hymn by William Cowper, melody by Lowell Mason (1772)].” <https://playbill.com/productions/parade-vivian-beaumont-theatre-vault-0000011233>.

enjoyed. Brown's music and lyrics do a masterful job of capturing the undisputed sorrow and anguish in response to this unthinkable crime. Indeed, the refrain of this musical section keeps echoing the words "no, it don't make sense." But this sadness ultimately gives way to vengeful anger as the community begins to turn toward the idea of retribution for Mary's murder. At the culmination of this number, Mary's friend and would-be suitor Frankie delivers a rage-filled solo:

He ain't never gonna get away with what he done to Mary.
Let him quiver in his boots. Let him run until he bleeds.
I won't rest until I know he's burning in the ragin' fires of hell forevermore.⁷¹

As Frankie holds out the note on the last syllable of "evermore," the assembled mourners resume their refrain of "There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood." The emotional outcry makes it difficult for the audience not to view their outrage as justified in light of the heinous nature of the crime, and recalls the public testimonials of family members of Adam Walsh or the victims of Jeffrey Dahmer. In the minds of the audience members, these crimes were perpetrated by what Gillian Harkins has referred to as the "moral monster" that was well established in the public imagination by the 1990s.⁷²

At the same time that *Parade* stirs the outrage of the viewer for the tragic crime, the audience is forced to witness how a corrupt political establishment and news media seek to frame Leo Frank, the innocent Jewish outsider, as the perpetrator of the crime. One of the subplots of *Parade* has to do with the news media's sensational coverage of heinous crimes and the capitalist

⁷¹ *Parade* cast album liner notes, 14.

⁷² Harkins, "Profiling Virtuality and Pedophilic Data," Chapter 2 in *Virtual Pedophilia: Sex Offender Profiling and U.S. Security Culture*.

greed to sell papers and stories whether they are true or not. Among the supporting characters is Britt Craig, a young reporter for the *Atlanta Georgian* looking for a big story while describing himself—much like Leo Frank—as a “stir crazy freak” who is “stuck in this town” where not much happens.⁷³ In his song “Big News,” Craig sings facetiously with over-the-top enthusiasm about the mundane news stories in Atlanta, ranging from a kitten in a tree, the mayor’s mother’s broken toe, and rain coming to break the heat. Despite the sarcasm, Craig’s characterization of these news stories reveals what he—and presumably his readers—are really seeking in their consumption of news: scandal. To capture the attention of his would-be readers, Craig cries out like a newsboy singing, “Stop the press—it’s a mess! / It’s the scandal of the age!! . . . Another shock to rock Atlanta.”⁷⁴ Sensationalism sells papers, whether the story is truly sensational or not.

Thus, for Craig, Mary Phagan’s murder and Leo Frank’s arrest are reasons to celebrate rather than mourn. In his reprise “Real Big News,” Craig explains how Frank is the “savior” who will revive his career. Craig plainly spells out how a college-educated Jew from Brooklyn in a xenophobic city is the perfect villain, one he chooses to exploit and embellish for his own gain.

He sings:

Big news! My savior has arrived!
My intuition's never been so strong!
Big news! My career has been revived—
All I needed was a snippy, pissy Yankee all along!
Take this superstitious city, add one little Jew from Brooklyn
Plus a college education and a mousy little wife,
And big news! Real big news!
That poor sucker saved my life!
So give him fangs, give him horns
Give him scaly, hairy palms!

⁷³ *Parade* cast album liner notes, 13.

⁷⁴ *Parade* cast album liner notes, 13.

Have him droolin' out the corner of his mouth!
He's a master of disguise!
Check those bug-out creepy eyes!
Sure, that fella's here to rape the whole damned South!
They'll be bangin' down my door,
Yellin' "More, Craig, more!"
"Call for justice! We need justice!
Beat the bastard! Kill the bum!"
Big news! Real big news!
My savior has finally come!⁷⁵

As the musical number continues, a bevy of citizens react to the news stories with their own testimonials. A woman sings, "He likes 'em young and small! Got nekkid pictures all pinned to his office wall!" A psychiatrist offers his clinical opinion: "I've watched him for a while. Behind that creepy smile—the classic pedophile!" Gillian Harkins has shown how during the 1990s, in the absence of clear scientific, forensic, or judicial definitions and profiles of pedophiles, the general public as audiences of news and television became "experts" based on predictive assumptions about certain kinds of behavior, like smiling.⁷⁶ Just as news media were capitalizing on the sensational details of highly-publicized pedophiles and serial murders throughout the 1990s, *Parade* showed how the media and public are easily whipped into a frenzy around cases where children are involved, even if they are not based in fact. Extrapolating even further, the musical indicted its audience for being complicit in the wrongful conviction of people like Leo Frank by trying people in the court of public opinion. Reviewers noted the lack of subtlety here, with Ben Brantley's *New York Times* review complaining that "this musical provides a painstakingly rendered chart of the wheels of injustice. And it never lets up in its insistence on the innocence, on several levels, of its protagonist and the moral blindness and

⁷⁵ *Parade* cast album liner notes, 15.

⁷⁶ Harkins, *Virtual Pedophilia*, 98.

corruption of his persecutors. . . . The result is often more podium-thumping screed than compelling story.”⁷⁷ In contrast to the feel-good, lighthearted critiques of the criminal justice system of the 1980s, critics and audiences did not respond well to theater pieces where they, as the viewer, were made to feel guilty.

Figure 7: “The Trial” as listed in the Broadway playbill for *Parade*

The Trial (Finale Act I):	
Pt. I: “It Is Time Now” ⁷⁸	Fiddlin’ John, Tom Watson, Ensemble
Pt. II: “Twenty Miles from Marietta”.....	Hugh Dorsey
Pt. III: Frankie’s Testimony.....	Frankie Epps, Mary Phagan, Watson, Ensemble
Pt. IV: “The Factory Girls / Come Up to My Office”.....	Iola, Essie, Monteen, Leo Frank
Pt. V: Newt Lee’s Testimony.....	Newt Lee, Ensemble
Pt. VI: “My Child Will Forgive Me”.....	Mrs. Phagan
Pt. VII: “That’s What He Said”.....	Jim Conley, Ensemble
Pt. VIII: Leo’s Statement: “It’s hard to speak my heart”.....	Leo Frank
Pt. IX: Closing Statements and Verdict.....	Ensemble

The Trial

Parade attempted to harness the American public’s obsession with court proceedings like those seen on network television by dramatizing the complete trial of Leo Frank. American audiences were gripped by the fictionalized court proceedings of tv shows such as *Law & Order* along with live coverage of real court proceedings on Court TV, which meant Brown and Uhry were tapping into a firmly-established and familiar dramatic structure when portraying Frank’s trial. The sequence is listed in the playbill as simply “The Trial (Finale Act I)” and uses Roman

⁷⁷ Ben Brantley, “Martyr’s Requiem Invokes Justice,” *New York Times*, December 18, 1998.

⁷⁸ The Broadway playbill lists this number as “It Is Time Now,” but the liner notes of the cast album call it “People of Atlanta,” after the opening incipit sung by Fiddlin’ John.

numerals to indicate each of the nine movements. The long scene is the musicalized witness testimony against Leo Frank by various individuals who worked at the factory or had other contact with him (see Figure 7). Before the trial begins, however, a crowd gathers before the trial and invokes the divine justice of a Christian God (“It Is Time Now”). Newspaper publisher and editor-in-chief of the *Jeffersonian*, Tom Watson, addresses the assembly, singing, “I have come to Atlanta with a message from the Lord! / I have come to see the devil get his true and just reward!”⁷⁹ Watson’s remarks here map Christian morality and innocence onto Mary and Georgians more broadly while equating Leo Frank, the Jewish outsider, as the devil. Jason Robert Brown’s notes in the album booklet reveal that an early title for the musical was actually “The Devil and Little Mary,” again juxtaposing the innocence of the victim with the monster of the virtual pedophile.⁸⁰ Again, contrary to 1980s megamusicals that appealed to audiences by celebrating the positive capacity of devout faith, *Parade* indicted Christian morality as the underpinning of anti-Semitism and xenophobia.

Much of the witness testimony during the trial serves to establish a profile of Leo Frank as a predatory pedophile, highlighting characteristics and behaviors now familiar to 1990s audiences as hallmarks of sex offenders. After the opening statement from district attorney Hugh Dorsey, the first witness called to the stand is the young boy Frankie Epps, who claims to have spoken to Mary Phagan on the morning she was murdered, the day of the Confederate Memorial Parade. In a flashback sequence understood to be Frankie’s recounting of the events, the audience sees and hears Mary describing feeling uncomfortable around her boss, Leo Frank. After telling Frankie that Mr. Frank looks at her, she sings the following refrain: “He calls my

⁷⁹ *Parade* cast album liner notes, 16.

⁸⁰ *Parade* cast album liner notes, 8.

name, / I turn my head, / He got no words to say. / His eyes get big, / My face gets red, / And I want to run away.”⁸¹ The crowd erupts in a polyphonic chorus of sung condemnation of Frank following this testimony. Frank pleads with his lawyer to do something but Rosser declines the opportunity to cross-examine the witness—the first in a series of events that suggest rigged proceedings and ineffective counsel. The prosecution then calls on more girls who work at the factory, who parrot Mary’s same melody with nearly identical lyrics, suggesting they have been coached so their stories will match. One young woman’s account quickly develops into a canon, with subsequent girls’ testimony layering and overlapping with strikingly similar language and melody (see Figure 8).

Figure 8: Overlapping lyrics of “The Factory Girls”

<p>Iola I’ll feel his breath Back of my neck. His hand against my chair. I’ll punch the clock, Pick up my check, It seems like he’s always there.</p>	<p>Girls He’ll call my name I’ll turn my head He got no words to say. His eyes get big, My face gets red. And I want to run away.</p>
<p>Iola, Essie I’m in the hall And then he’s there, He passes much too close. I change my clothes, Put up my hair... And somehow, I’m sure he knows—</p>	<p>Monteen I’m in the lounge, I turn around, He passes much too close. I eat my lunch, I hear a sound... And somehow, I’m sure he knows—</p>

⁸¹ *Parade* cast album liner notes, 17.

Rather than relying solely on hearsay and narration, *Parade* allowed audiences to see Leo Frank as the virtual monster personified. In the middle of the girls' testimony, a bit of theater magic transforms Leo Frank from humble accused to active predator right there in the courtroom. Here, an imagined Frank sings in hushed tones over jazzy, ragtime-inflected music that carries connotations of an urban Manhattan lifestyle and racy, sex-charged dancing that would have been untoward for genteel southerners. This phantom Frank invites the girls up to his office using classic grooming techniques, offering alcohol, gifts, privacy, and suggesting that "no one has to know but me and you."⁸² As Frank continues dancing, the girls resume their refrain in counterpoint with the now raucous jazz underscoring. As the sequence comes to a close, the real Leo Frank again protests, yelling out, "Somebody told them to say all that. They were coached. They were coached!" But again, his counsel refuses the opportunity to formally object or cross-examine the girls. While reviewers may have objected to the musical's heavy-handed, moralistic approach to its historical subject, they loved its depiction of the virtual pedophile. *New York Times* reviewer Vincent Canby singled this sequence out as the most effective in the entire musical. In his words, "[Frank] becomes the lewd, sweaty-palmed pervert the girls have described, as he sings, dances and proudly exults in the licentiousness they have talked about in such polite euphemisms."⁸³

The portrait of Leo Frank as a pedophile is further elaborated by the testimony of Jim Conley, the Black man who worked as a janitor at the factory. One of the most disturbing elements of the historical and dramatized version of the Leo Frank story is how the white Southerners pitted Blacks and Jews against one another by using Conley to testify against Frank.

⁸² *Parade* cast album liner notes, 17.

⁸³ Vincent Canby, "Pedigree Versus Play: The Mystery of *Parade*," *New York Times*, December 27, 1998.

The musical strongly suggests that it was Jim Conley who actually committed the crime, for which there is historical evidence.⁸⁴ In the musical, District Attorney Hugh Dorsey is seen blackmailing Conley, saying he knows he is an “escaped convict” who ran away from serving on a chain gang.⁸⁵ In court, Conley’s summons to the stand causes a stir with onlookers, a polyphonic din that recalls the cacophony leading into the trial. Here, the onlookers sing racist asides to one another questioning, “Why they gonna call that . . . man?,” using the harshest of racial slurs, and suggesting Conley is “puttin’ on airs,” despite the fact that he is “no damn good.”⁸⁶ Once on the stand, Conley tells the court that Leo Frank would routinely ask him to watch his office door while he brought in visitors. Conley’s testimony is meant to establish Frank as a sex maniac; in addition to the ladies coming “once or twice a month,” Conley goes on to say, “And once, I remember there were two ladies. Another time, there was this young Black gentleman from Chicago...” This mention of homosexuality barely escapes Conley’s lips before it is met with an objection from Leo’s defense attorney, Luther Rosser. This brief moment passes by very quickly, but is nevertheless rooted in 1990s politics where gay men were being equated with sexual deviants and pedophiles during the HIV/AIDS crisis.

⁸⁴ In 1982, Alonzo Mann, who as a boy testified at Frank’s trial, signed an affidavit on his death bed claiming Frank’s innocence. He claimed that he had seen Jim Conley carrying Mary’s body, and that Conley threatened to kill him if told anyone what he had seen. Douglas O. Linder, “The Leo Frank Trial (1913),” Famous Trials: Accounts and Materials for 100 of History’s Most Important Trials,” University of Missouri - Kansas City School of Law, accessed October 20, 2024. <https://famous-trials.com/leo-frank/28-chronology>. Later, in Act II, Georgia Governor John Slaton visits Jim Conley who is back on the chain gang (evidently arrested for some other crime, despite having been promised clemency for testifying against Leo Frank). Slaton pokes holes in Conley’s story with new evidence linking him to the murder, but Conley denies it.

⁸⁵ The similarity here to the plot of *Les Misérables* is worth mentioning, especially considering *Les Mis* was still running as one of the most popular musicals on Broadway at this time.

⁸⁶ *Parade* cast album liner notes, 18.

After a wave of testimony vilifying Frank, the writers of *Parade* bring the sympathy of the audience to its height as Leo takes the stand in his own defense at the emotional climax of the trial. The musical number, “Leo’s Statement,” is subtitled after its incipit, “It’s hard to speak my heart.” Jason Robert Brown’s music and lyrics portray Leo Frank as a shy, nervous, innocent man who has been falsely accused. The song begins with a vamp of soft, pulsing quarter notes in an open fourth (dominant and tonic). When Leo finally sings the incipit, “It’s hard to speak my heart,” his vocal melody mirrors the melody of “How Can I Call This Home.” While this decision by Brown can at once be seen as a kind of recurring musical leitmotif for the character, the dramatic connection between feeling uncomfortable and out of place is significant. His opening words unfurl in even eighth notes, serving as an anacrusis to the first vocal downbeat on the word “heart.” Here, Brown introduces a surprising harmony of C-major harmony (flat VI) against the clearly established key of E major. Leo’s final vocal pitch of F sharp adds further dissonance to the C-major/E-major bitonality (again, out of place), and this extended chord becomes a recurring harmony throughout the number.

Figure 9: “Leo’s Statement” excerpt

The musical score for the excerpt of "Leo's Statement" is presented in E major and 4/4 time. The vocal line begins with a half rest, followed by a quarter rest, and then the lyrics "I ne-ver touched that girl." are sung on a series of eighth notes. The piano accompaniment features a vamp of soft, pulsing quarter notes in an open fourth (dominant and tonic) in the right hand, and a bass line in the left hand. The score includes a grand staff with treble and bass clefs, and a separate line for the piano's left hand.

Leo's vocal line unfolds in short phrases punctuated by rests and includes instruction in the score to use falsetto on the highest note, signaling his nervousness and the difficulty he has expressing himself ("I'm not a man who bares his soul"). After an initial sixteen-bar stanza, accompanied by those same pulsing quarter notes over top of harmony changes in the bass, the texture changes. Leo leads into the second stanza with an identical melodic sequence on new, important text: "I never touched that girl" (Figure 9). On the downbeat ("girl"), the accompaniment bursts into undulating sixteenth notes, outlining the C-major-with-F-sharp harmony, an ostinato that persists incessantly over changing bass harmonies as Leo explains that he barely knew Mary Phagan and that the witnesses are falsely testifying against him. The tumultuous texture reverts briefly to quarter notes as Leo sings, "I know it makes no sense," eerily echoing the text of the refrain from Mary's funeral ("it don't make sense"), but here singing about being falsely accused as a scapegoat. In the final stanza, Leo becomes more desperate. As the sixteenth-note ostinato returns, he turns to self-deprecation, calling himself "scared," "blind," and "lost," to convince the crowd that he could not have possibly committed the crime. As the number reaches a climax, Leo sings the recurring high note—previously sung in falsetto—in full voice, on the final word of the line "I never touched that child. God! I never raised my hand!" Leo finishes by admitting he is "incredibly afraid," and praying for understanding from the jury. The number trails off the way it began, with the pulsing quarter-note dyad functioning as a transition into the closing arguments from the prosecution and defense. While this testimony is earnest, it is difficult to imagine that American audiences would not have had the disingenuous words of President Bill Clinton from less than a year earlier—"I did not have sexual relations with that woman"—ringing in their ears.

Parade was asking its audiences to sympathize with a man falsely accused of sexual assault at a time when the American news and television media was relentlessly covering stories of legitimate abuse. Even more, the musical was taking an antagonistic posture toward its audience, who it suggested were complicit in its grim outcome by participating in a media culture overly obsessed with sex crime and criminal cases. *Parade* makes it undoubtedly clear to the audience that the pitiable Leo Frank is being framed and ultimately murdered for a crime he did not commit, motivated by anti-Semitism. Still, the horrible details of the crime and the emotional reactions to it would likely have struck a chord with audiences who were steeped in a culture focused on protecting innocent children from the perceived threat of violent male offenders. It is this dissonance that contributes to what theater scholar Megan Stahl has described as the limit of historical empathy when dramatizing true crime.⁸⁷ Stahl argues that in contrast to traditional theatrical empathy, whereby an audience member can relate to a particular character or point of view expressed by a piece through a fictional narrative, historical empathy “requires an intellectual involvement with the piece, a consideration of the particular people, places and circumstances within a broader framework.”⁸⁸ She notes that “*Parade*’s fidelity to the truth of its source material and its bleak conclusion shifts the focus from a crisis of character to the broader crisis of racial and ethnic prejudice in America, conflicting with the audience’s ability to develop a traditional empathic response through the comfort of artificiality. The performance brings

⁸⁷ Megan Stahl, “Too Big for Broadway?: The Limits of Historical and Theatrical Empathy in *Parade* and *The Scottsboro Boys*,” *Studies in Musical Theatre* 10, no. 1 (2016): 69–79.

⁸⁸ Megan Stahl, “Too Big for Broadway,” 70.

history to life onstage in a form that actively violates spectators' desire to avoid such excessively deep emotions."⁸⁹ Ultimately, this violation would serve as *Parade*'s Achilles heel.

Reception

Parade was disastrously short-lived on Broadway, opening in December of 1998 and closing just two months later in February 1999. Critics and audiences in the late 1990s were unified in their backlash. Though the production's longevity was certainly sabotaged by the Chapter 11 bankruptcy of its corporate producer Livent, leaving the \$100,000 a week operating costs solely to the nonprofit Lincoln Center Theater, many theater writers equally faulted the material itself. Journalist Peter Marks, for example, referred to the "relentless solemnity" of *Parade* and "the production's atmosphere of chilly self-importance," grouping it with two other commercial flops produced by nonprofit theaters that season, suggesting that with these shows "serious" had become synonymous with "inaccessible."⁹⁰ Audiences agreed. In a letter to the editor in response to Marks's article, one New York theatergoer explicitly drew the connection between the subject of the musical and the politics and news media of the day, including the Clinton impeachment, saying:

The creators and producers of musicals have clearly forgotten: the audience's pleasure should be considered when preparing a show . . . I came away feeling that a form of isolationism had crept into the theater community comparable to the insular inside-the-Beltway mentality displayed in Washington recently during the impeachment crisis. Where do composers, lyricists, librettists, directors and producers get their notions of what it is we

⁸⁹ Megan Stahl, "Too Big for Broadway," 71–72.

⁹⁰ Peter Marks, "They Sure Were Nonprofit Musicals," *New York Times*, March 28, 1999.
<https://www.nytimes.com/1999/03/28/theater/theater-they-sure-were-nonprofit-musicals.html>.

hope for when we buy a ticket to a new musical? Like the Senators and Sunday morning pundits, the show people are not tuned in.⁹¹

Both *Kiss of the Spider Woman* and *Parade* were products of their time. By telling the story of men accused and convicted of sex crimes against minors, these musicals responded to a very specific American cultural moment. Yet the story and the message of these musicals is ultimately one of sympathy for the accused, guilty or not. The marginalized identities of these men and their own brutal suffering as a result of those identities attempt to elicit sympathy from the audience. But these same theatergoers, steeped in pervasive media accounts of real crimes by real criminals and the slew of federal laws being enacted to combat the issue of sex crimes against minors, would have a hard time sitting in the discomfort of these competing realities. Even more, the creators of these musicals were so heavy-handed in their approach to these topics, they isolated their audiences who were made to feel complicit in their injustices despite their temporal and geographic removal from the shows' content.

It would seem that the temporal proximity of these musicals to the issues they were attempting to address were indeed their biggest hurdle. Two to three decades on, the 1990s has been newly remembered in a wave of nostalgic retrospectives, including its darkest moments. Hollywood producers like Ryan Murphy have recounted many of the sensational 1990s trials that captured the American public, including those of O.J. Simpson, Jeffrey Dahmer, the Menendez brothers, and the Clinton impeachment, making them fresh for modern audiences.⁹² The musical theater industry has also been revisiting the 1990s. A return of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* has

⁹¹ Michael Shau, "FAILED MUSICALS; What We Want," letter to the editor, *New York Times*, April 11, 1999. <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/04/11/theater/1-failed-musicals-what-we-want-142131.html>.

⁹² See *The People vs. O. J. Simpson: American Crime Story* (FX, 2016), *Impeachment: American Crime Story* (FX, 2021), *Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* (Netflix, 2022), and *Monsters: The Lyle and Erik Menendez Story* (Netflix, 2024).

been brewing over the last ten or so years.⁹³ Recently, it was announced that Jennifer Lopez will star as Aurora in a film adaptation of the musical directed by Bill Condon.⁹⁴ In November of 2022, a New York City Center Encores! revival production of *Parade* starring Ben Platt as Leo Frank was met with overwhelming critical acclaim, prompting a limited engagement Broadway transfer. In his review of the Encores! production, designating it as a Critic’s Pick, Juan A. Ramírez described it as a “smartly-directed,” “timely, excellent production” that “delves further into America’s history of violence.”⁹⁵ He further connects the piece to contemporary America, writing, “This country’s ongoing procession of racism, antisemitism and “law-and-order”-screaming politicians comes awfully close to the hate-filled climate of the work’s setting.” Yet, in the entire article, Ramírez never once refers to the sexual assault or pedophile hysteria at the center of the piece, referring instead to Mary Phagan’s death as simply a murder. Perhaps this omission might suggest a newfound sensitivity around the subject of sex abuse American society over the last two-and-a-half decades. Or, it is equally possible that twenty-six seasons of dramatized sex crimes on television shows like *Law & Order: SVU* have so inured audiences to such a troubling subject as to make it unremarkable.⁹⁶

⁹³ Logan Culwell-Block, “Tonatiuh, Diego Luna Board Jennifer Lopez-Led *Kiss of the Spider Woman* Movie Musical,” Playbill, April 9, 2024, <https://playbill.com/article/tonatiuh-diego-luna-board-jennifer-lopez-led-kiss-of-the-spider-woman-movie-musical>. This article, though about the casting choices for Molina and Valentin, covers some of the stirrings to revive *Spider Woman* in some form going back to 2015.

⁹⁴ Adam B. Vairy, “Jennifer Lopez Attached to Star in ‘Kiss of the Spider Woman’ Musical Film From ‘Dreamgirls’ Director Bill Condon (EXCLUSIVE),” *Variety*, December 6, 2023. <https://variety.com/2023/film/news/jennifer-lopez-kiss-of-the-spider-woman-musical-bill-condon-1235825197/>.

⁹⁵ Juan A. Ramírez, “*Parade* Review: The Trial and Tragedy of Leo Frank,” *New York Times*, November 2, 2022.

⁹⁶ For more on the effects of *Law & Order: SVU* on public perception of pedophiles during the 2000s and 2010s, see “Informational Image and Procedural Tone,” Chapter 3 in Gillian Harkins, *Virtual Pedophilia: Sex Offender Profiling and U.S. Security Culture*.

Chapter 3

“Prisoners of Love”:

Comedy and Satire at the Turn of the Millennium

“What is Urinetown? Urinetown’s the end.
Swift and brutal punishment—no need now to pretend.”
—*Urinetown*, September 2001

On March 12, 2020, the Broadway League made a stunning announcement: in light of the growing coronavirus pandemic, which by then had infected nearly one hundred people in New York City, Broadway shows would be closing for a period of four weeks, until April 12.¹ Fear had begun to grow after a Broadway usher tested positive a few days before. Ultimately, four weeks would extend to eighteen months, with Broadway performances not resuming again until September of 2021. But even at its original length, the four-week closure would have been the longest complete shutdown in the industry’s history. Given the similar circumstances, news reporting was quick to draw the comparison to another total shutdown nearly twenty years before, following the September 11th terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001. Though Broadway theaters only officially closed for two days after 9/11, the attack had long-lasting effects on the industry. As with Covid-19, locals were worried about their own safety and tourists were staying away from the city. The attacks contributed to an already overwhelming sense of doom and gloom at the turn of the twenty-first century, as Americans grappled with ecological crisis, a broken political system, and a police state that had incarcerated more people than anywhere in the world.

¹ Michael Paulson, “Broadway, Symbol of New York Resilience, Shuts Down Amid Virus Threat,” *New York Times*, March 12, 2020.

The number of incarcerated Americans continued to soar throughout the 1990s, reaching two million by the turn of the millennium. Following twelve years of tough-on-crime rhetoric from Reagan and Bush, Democrats knew that in order to win, they would have to wrest the issue of crime away from Republicans alone. Presidential candidate Bill Clinton ran on a “yes, but” platform that affirmed his support of tough punishments like the death penalty while also promoting preventative measures like community policing. Yet, once elected, Clinton found he would need to position himself closer to the center in order to get legislation through congress.² The 1994 Crime Bill was a compromise that added one hundred thousand police officers to the streets and created a three-strikes rule mandating a life sentence for drug offenders after three convictions.

Much of the American public was also losing faith in its political institutions thanks to a series of demoralizing blows. By the mid-1990s, the Clinton administration was mired in controversy surrounding sexual misconduct allegations against him, leading many to question whether strong moral character was a necessary component of being President of the United States. Clinton’s historic impeachment in 1998, the second in the nation’s history, was widely unpopular among the American public, with polls indicating only 37% favored impeachment and Clinton’s approval rating remaining at 64%.³ When the Bush v. Gore election of 2000 was ultimately decided by a partisan Supreme Court, many Americans just wanted to laugh at the state of politics in the United States.

² See Antonio de Velasco, *Centrist Rhetoric: The Production of Political Transcendence in the Clinton Presidency* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010).

³ “Poll: Public Still Prefers Censure,” CNN, December 19, 1998.

This chapter explains how disillusion with American politics and the harsh economic realities of Broadway in the 1980s and 1990s led to a satirical tone in many of the musicals at the turn of the new millennium. In particular, two Broadway musicals from 2001 responded with satire and comedy to the precipitous rise in incarceration and policing in the United States over the preceding two decades. Scholarship on contemporary musical theater has shown that during this same period, after a wave of largely unsuccessful “serious” musicals in the 1990s, Broadway creatives took a turn toward more escapist, satirical, and comically self-referential approaches to musical storytelling, often turning to popular films as source material as a way to draw in audiences.⁴

One example is Mel Brooks’s adaptation of his 1967 cult comedy *The Producers*, where two crooked theater producers are sent to prison for their financial crimes. There they write a musical for the inmates to perform called *Prisoners of Love*, which eventually transfers to Broadway and opens to rave reviews, providing a happy ending for all. While some new musicals, like *The Producers*, were adaptations of popular films, other musicals looked backward and offered a pastiche of early political musicals like *Threepenny Opera* and *The Cradle Will Rock*. In *Urinetown*—set in a dystopian future where private toilets are illegal and citizens are forced to use fee-based public facilities—a stage full of dancing police officers sing gleefully about the thrill of rounding up so-called criminals and sending them off to punishment (execution).

I argue that the success of these musicals, which both ran for several years after their opening in 2001, was largely fueled by a culture steeped in a decades-long escalation of the prison population. However, I further suggest that the 9/11 terrorist attacks that year, the passage

⁴ See James Leve, *American Musical Theater* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 280–286.

of the USA PATRIOT Act less than two months later, and the establishment of the Guantanamo Bay Detention Center in Cuba created a new and unexpected context of the War on Terror and domestic surveillance (which has come to be known as “the security state”) that made these pieces even more resonant for theater audiences after they opened.

American Politics at the Turn of the Millennium

The “tough on crime” stance of the Republican Party became bipartisan in the 1990s. In order to win over a majority of American voters, presidential candidate Bill Clinton chose to make crime a central element to his campaign. During his speech announcing his run for president, Clinton described “making our cities and our streets safe from crime and drugs,” and spoke of being on the side of “citizens [who] are banding together to take their streets and neighborhoods back.”⁵ Michael Dukakis’s failed presidential race in 1988 had shown Democrats that American voters were not willing to think about crime policies that differed substantially from the approaches of Nixon, Reagan, and Bush, all of which focused on punishment rather than prevention and rehabilitation. In particular, the stance for both Reagan and Bush was that to be tough on crime meant supporting the death penalty.⁶ This is why, in an early attempt to prove his commitment to capital punishment, Clinton flew back to Arkansas just weeks before the New Hampshire primary to oversee the execution of Ricky Ray Rector, a mentally impaired Black

⁵ Stephen Smith, *Preface to the Presidency: Selected Speeches of Bill Clinton 1974–1992* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1996), 83.

⁶ David B. Holian, “He’s Stealing My Issues! Clinton’s Crime Rhetoric and the Dynamics of Issue Ownership,” *Political Behavior* 26, no. 2 (June 2004): 95–124.

man.⁷ In August of 1992, during a press conference for the National Association of Police Officers in Pontiac, Michigan, Clinton reiterated that he supported the death penalty as governor.⁸

Still, Clinton initially adopted an approach to crime that shifted the emphasis from punishment to prevention. From the outset, Clinton criticized the Bush administration for their cuts to police budgets, insisting that he would instead give them more support and increase the police presence. Throughout his campaign, Clinton would routinely cite the statistic that “there are three crimes today for every police officer on the street, as compared with thirty years ago when there were three policemen for every crime.”⁹ He made early pledges to add one hundred thousand police officers nationwide and celebrated the positive effects of community policing in cities like New York, Houston, and Philadelphia.¹⁰

Once elected, however, Clinton found that he needed to double down on his tough-on-crime stance to form a bipartisan coalition. In his 1994 State of the Union address, he again promised to grow the police force and advocated for a federal “three strikes you’re out” law, which was met by applause on both sides of the aisle. These ideas were codified into law later that year as part of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, often referred

⁷ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, 10th anniversary ed. (New York: New Press, 2020), 71.

⁸ Smith, *Preface to the Presidency*, 278.

⁹ Smith, *Preface to the Presidency*. Clinton made this reference at the U.S. Conference of Mayors in Houston, Texas, June 22, 1992; the National Association of Police Officers Press Conference Pontiac, Michigan, August 20, 1992; at Montgomery College Rockville, Maryland, September 2, 1992;

¹⁰ Smith, *Preface to the Presidency*, 239. Community policing was a regular topic in Clinton’s stump speeches, but during his speech to the Urban League National Convention San Diego, California on July 27, 1992, he referenced all three cities (New York, Houston, and Philadelphia).

to simply as the Clinton Crime Bill. The bill, which constituted the most extensive federal crime legislation ever passed, authorized the death penalty for dozens of new and existing federal crimes and mandated life imprisonment for a third offense.¹¹ The bill also included provisions for 100,000 new police officers and allocated \$9.7 billion for prisons.¹² The \$8 billion police program, called Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS), significantly increased the presence of police in communities around the country.¹³ Despite Clinton boasting that this program contributed to a reduction in crime rates in the 1990s, studies have shown it had little to no effect.¹⁴ Still, the Clinton Crime Bill was integral in helping Clinton get elected to a second term in 1996. According to Michelle Alexander, “By the mid-1990s, no serious alternatives to the War on Drugs and ‘get-tough’ movement were being entertained in mainstream political discourse.”¹⁵ By the end of his second term, the prison population in the United States had ballooned to more than two million.¹⁶

¹¹ Lauren-Brooke Eisen, “The 1994 Crime Bill and Beyond: How Federal Funding Shapes the Criminal Justice System,” Brennan Center for Justice at NYU Law, September 9, 2019, accessed July 10, 2024, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/1994-crime-bill-and-beyond-how-federal-funding-shapes-criminal-justice>.

¹² “1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act,” Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, February 14, 2020, accessed July 10, 2024, <https://www.ojp.gov/ojp50/1994-violent-crime-control-and-law-enforcement-act>.

¹³ Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 315.

¹⁴ John L. Worrall and Tomislav V. Kovandzic, “COPS Grants and Crime Revisited,” *Criminology* 45, no. 1 (Feb. 2007): 159–90.

¹⁵ Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 73.

¹⁶ Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 77.

During his presidency, Clinton also took aim at the poor, “[capitulating] to the conservative racial agenda on welfare” and “[creating] the current racial undercaste.”¹⁷ The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 effectively ended the welfare system and replaced the aid program for families with children with a temporary assistance program with a five-year lifetime limit. Further, the program permanently denied benefits of welfare and food stamps for any person convicted of a felony drug offense. Clinton also advanced a “one-strike” policy for federal housing, meaning drug felons could be evicted or denied housing once out of prison. Federal dollars were directed from public housing projects (a decrease of \$17 billion) to prison construction and infrastructure (an increase of \$19 billion) as more and more Americans, mostly people of color, were incarcerated.

When Clinton was impeached in 1998 for lying about sexual misconduct with an intern, many Americans became disillusioned with politics. Polls at the time indicated that only about thirty percent of respondents approved of the impeachment.¹⁸ In fact, the impeachment actually hurt Republicans, as polls showed more participants continued to have a favorable view of Clinton’s job performance as president and the Democratic Party in terms of their ability to solve the nation’s problems over Republicans.¹⁹ Faith in the political system was further eroded by the contentious 2000 presidential election between George W. Bush and Al Gore, which hinged on a razor-thin margin in the State of Florida that was ultimately decided in Bush’s favor by the

¹⁷ Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 72.

¹⁸ Drew Desilver, “Clinton’s Impeachment Barely Dented His Public Support, and It Turned off Many Americans,” Pew Research Center, October 3, 2019. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/10/03/clintons-impeachment-barely-dented-his-public-support-and-it-turned-off-many-americans/>.

¹⁹ Keating Holland, “Poll: Republican Image Hurt by Impeachment Process,” CNN, February 15, 1999, accessed September 15, 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/stories/1999/02/15/poll/>.

Supreme Court. Harvard Law professor Alan Dershowitz described *Bush v. Gore* as “the single most corrupt decision in Supreme Court history, because . . . the majority justices decided as they did because of the personal identity and political affiliation of the litigants.”²⁰ Dissenting Justice David Souter later claimed the case shook his own confidence in the institution of the United States Supreme Court.²¹ The contentious election meant Bush became president “with half of the nation questioning his legitimate title to the White House,” and “now more knowledgeable and more cynical about political maneuvering.”²²

Thus, by 2001, Americans were grappling with a rash of discouraging political realities that left them shaking their heads and throwing up their hands. The rhetoric around crime and punishment had continued to escalate throughout the Clinton years with the 1994 Crime Bill. The Clinton administration’s policies resulted in the largest increases in federal and state prison populations in history, “beyond what conservatives had imagined possible a decade earlier.”²³ It seemed that fiscally conservative politicians were taking aim at the poor by reducing spending on public services while boosting spending on prisons to accommodate the growing influx of inmates. Despite the graphic details of the Clinton sex scandal plastered all over the news media, polls revealed that most respondents did not approve of the impeachment, even after being lied to by their president. American politics had become more divided than ever, with a razor thin presidential election being decided by a politically motivated Supreme Court. These factors

²⁰ Alan Dershowitz, *Supreme Injustice: How the High Court Hijacked Election 2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 174.

²¹ Jeffrey Toobin, *The Oath: The Obama White House and the Supreme Court* (New York: Doubleday, 2012), 123.

²² Gerald M. Pomper, “The 2000 Presidential Election: Why Gore Lost,” *Political Science Quarterly* 116, no. 2 (2001): 218.

²³ Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 71.

contributed to a general malaise that left American theater audiences looking for something to laugh about.

Broadway at the Turn of the Millennium

The last two decades of the twentieth century were a period of great transformation for the Broadway musical. As with American politics, disillusionment with the business of Broadway grew among many theatergoers and artists. The HIV/AIDS epidemic tore through the performing arts community, claiming the lives of thousands of performers and creatives in the industry. The so-called “British invasion” of megamusicals from the U.K. wowed tourist audiences with their spectacle, even if their substance was viewed by some as lacking. These spectacle shows were unprecedentedly expensive to produce and had to be championed by wealthy investors like Cameron Mackintosh who marketed the shows like brands. As production costs soared, so too did the cost of tickets. The cost of an orchestra seat on Broadway rose 400 percent in the eight year period between 1993 and 2001, compared to an overall economic inflation of 35.4 percent in that timeframe.²⁴ Seizing on a newly cleaned up theater district and influx of tourists bringing children to the city, the Walt Disney Corporation began producing Broadway musical adaptations of their popular animated films, first with *Beauty and the Beast* (1994) and then *The Lion King* (1997).²⁵ As shown in Chapter 2, there seemed to be decreased appetite—and funding—for “serious musicals” tackling complex social and political issues.

²⁴ Nathan Hurwitz, *A History of the American Musical Theater: No Business Like It* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 228.

²⁵ Elizabeth Wollman, “The Economic Development of the “New” Times Square and Its Impact on the Broadway Musical,” *American Music* 20, no. 4 (2002): 445–465.

Instead, movie studios with deep pockets capitalized on name recognition and nostalgia to bring new musicals to Broadway based on popular films.

Director and choreographer Susan Stroman described the change in the mindset of American theatergoers at the turn of the millennium during a 2003 interview with Michael Kantor, saying, “Now, when [audiences] go to the theater, they not only want to be entertained but they want to be informed.”²⁶ Using the recently-opened show *Hairspray* (about racial integration in the 1960s, along with commentary on body size) as an example, she explains, “they’ve taken a very important subject and made it complete entertainment.” The musical *Hairspray* was a stage adaptation of a 1988 John Waters cult comedy that had gained popularity in the 1990s, drawing in audiences with a recognizable title. Stroman asserts that these increasingly common shows, often dubbed “movicals,” can continue to be successful so long as there is a good story involved that audiences can latch onto. Disney had opened the doors to Broadway for those who had had successful careers in Hollywood.

Mel Brooks’s *The Producers*

One Hollywood personality looking to make an entrance on Broadway was director Mel Brooks, who had always been a great lover of the theater despite working almost exclusively in film and television throughout his career. In 2003, Brooks sat for an interview with director Michael Kantor for a PBS film that would be titled *Broadway: The American Musical*.²⁷ During the interview, Brooks professes his love for musical comedy as distinct from musicals more

²⁶ *Interview with Susan Stroman (raw footage)*, September 30, 2003, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Billy Rose Theatre Division, Theatre on Film and Tape Archive, NCOX 2179.

²⁷ *Interview with Mel Brooks (raw footage)*, November 7, 2003, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Billy Rose Theatre Division, Theatre on Film and Tape Archive, NCOX 2183.

broadly. Brooks remembers *Anything Goes* as the first musical he ever saw, and describes *Guys and Dolls* as the greatest musical of all time. It is interesting to consider that in both musicals, crime is a central component of the plot. In *Anything Goes*, an incompetent but disguised gangster on the run deceives the naïve banker Billy Crocker into assuming the identity of “Snake Eyes” Johnson, Public Enemy No. 1. When the true identities of both men are revealed, they are put in a holding cell aboard the ship before being pardoned by the U.S. government. In *Guys and Dolls*, Nathan Detroit runs an illegal gambling ring that “floats” between various illicit locations in order to avoid getting busted by the police. Both the primary male lead (Sky Masterson) and comedic secondary male lead (Nathan) are professional gamblers who eventually reform their ways by attending a revival at the local mission. In his interview with Kantor, Mel Brooks insists that “it’s the Broadway musical [comedy] that’s the most unique, artistic event that distinguishes us from every other country in the world. . . .No one can make a musical comedy like Americans.”²⁸ This interview took place just after Brooks created his first Broadway musical, a stage adaptation of his 1967 film *The Producers*, which opened in April 2001. When considering *Anything Goes* and *Guys and Dolls* alongside *The Producers*, it seems clear that, at least for Brooks, there is something about the undercurrent of crime, policing, and incarceration in the American musical comedy that is essential to the art form.

Susan Stroman, who served as director and choreographer for *The Producers*, explained that 2001 seemed like the perfect time to bring that show to the stage. “Just what was going on in the world at that time. . . .I know New York was at a point where they needed to laugh . . . what was happening financially, what was happening politically . . . that someone could go and forget

²⁸ Mel Brooks, interview by Michael Kantor, November 7, 2003, videorecording, Theatre on Film and Tape Archive, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, NY.

all their troubles for three hours seemed perfect.” Stroman is likely referring, at least in part, to American morale after an impeached president Clinton left office and a contentious presidential election in 2000 was ultimately decided by a controversial ruling by the United States Supreme Court in *Bush v. Gore*. In addition, the Clinton crime bill had contributed to U.S. prison populations rising to over two million people. Thus, a musical where corrupt businessmen are sent to prison and write a musical for the inmates might indeed make an audience laugh in a cathartic kind of way.

Like the original film, the musical version of *The Producers* tells the story of a failing theater producer, Max Bialystock, who colludes with naïve and somewhat starstruck accountant Leo Bloom to embezzle oversold investment funds in a musical they intentionally plan to be a flop. The musical in question is *Springtime for Hitler: A Gay Romp with Adolf and Eva at Berchtesgaden*, a show written by an ex-Nazi soldier celebrating the life and work of Hitler. However, despite all attempts to produce the worst, most unpopular musical in history, the show ends up being a surprise success, exposing the financial crimes of the two producers and landing them in prison.

The threat of prison looms large over the plot of *The Producers*. When Leo first looks over Max’s books and notices a \$2,000 discrepancy, Max explains that he has been struggling lately and asks for Leo’s skill in hiding the funds in the bookkeeping, crying, “Don’t send me to prison. Help!”²⁹ As Leo realizes and explains the potential money-making potential of producing a flop, Max asks, “But what if my show was a hit?” To which Leo replies, “Well, then you’d go to jail.”³⁰ This exchange sets up the charm song “We Can Do It,” in which Max coaxes Leo into

²⁹ Mel Brooks and Tom Meehan, *The Producers* (New York: Roundtable Press, 2001), 90.

³⁰ Brooks and Meehan, *The Producers*, 92.

joining him in a crooked scheme to produce the worst musical in history, take the investment overages, and run off to Rio. Just before the end of the song, Leo sings out, “You see Rio, I see jail!”³¹ Several comic references to the idea of going to jail keep the joke running throughout the show. As Max and Leo are panicking over the surprise success of *Springtime for Hitler*, Leo says, “I’m going to cooperate with the authorities. They’ll reduce my sentence and then there’s time off for good behavior. Maybe I’ll get a good job in the prison library.”³² When the cops are arresting Max, who has been pretending to be Irish to win favor with the Irish policeman, the officer says, “You’re a lucky man . . . they’re making corned beef and cabbage down to the jail tonight.”³³ After Max’s arrest, Leo is briefly wracked with guilt and torn between turning himself in and running off to Rio with Ulla. Ulla tries to convince Leo by saying he will go to jail for “years and years and years.” Mathew Broderick delivers his next line in comically sarcastic fashion: “Oh, my God, what a dilemma. What should I do? Go to jail or go to Rio?”³⁴

While both the musical and the film of *The Producers* end with a court scene followed by a prison scene, there are several key differences in the events leading up to them. One of these has to do with the visibility of police in the arrest of Max and Leo. In both the musical and the film, after *Springtime for Hitler* is an unexpected smash hit, the producers come back to their office in a panic about what to do with their crooked accounting books. Franz bursts in with a gun wanting to shoot Max and Leo over the depiction and performance of Hitler (which he was unable to perform due to his broken leg). After suggesting that Franz shoot the actors instead

³¹ Brooks and Meehan, *The Producers*, 94.

³² Brooks and Meehan, *The Producers*, 195.

³³ Brooks Meehan, *The Producers*, 201.

³⁴ Brooks and Meehan, *The Producers*, 203.

(which is vetoed by Leo), Max suggests they blow up the theater to sabotage the production. In the film, the scene cuts to the three men under the theater. Franz lights the fuse of a bomb, but quickly realizes he has used a quick fuse instead of a slow fuse, and there is an animated explosion of the theater. The next scene is all three men—who have miraculously survived—in court as the judge is asking the jury for its verdict. The viewer does not see the arrest.

More than thirty years later, in adapting the film for the Broadway stage, the writers seem to have wanted to expand the police and prison action for contemporary audiences. In the musical Franz's wild gunfire and the argument over what to do to sabotage the show becomes so raucous that the police are summoned, banging on the office door, and burst in with their guns drawn. Leo is able to hide, but Franz is arrested. As he is carried out, the policeman says "Next stop: Sing Sing," referring to the prison on the Hudson River north of New York City.³⁵ This statement by the cops also implies that Franz is assumed guilty, even before a trial. Meanwhile, Max is caught with the books and arrested as well, but not until after a comedic bit about Irish cops in New York City. Max tries to win favor with a police officer by imitating the cop's thick Irish accent. When this fails, Max appeals to another cop, who happens to be Black, but this cop, it turns out, also has a strong Irish accent. Realizing hope is lost, Max gets carried out by the police. The decision to depict a comedy-filled arrest scene for Max and Franz catered to modern audiences who, by this point, existed in a media culture and physical environment oversaturated with police.

Like many other musicals in the early 2000s, *The Producers* is a send up of the Broadway musical itself. Its humor often arrives in the form of parodies of familiar tropes in the genre, and this includes the prison scene. The ubiquity and success of prison scenes in modern

³⁵ Brooks and Meehan, *The Producers*, 199.

late-twentieth-century musicals explains the addition of extra prison content in *The Producers* on Broadway. Both the film and the musical end with a prison scene, but the musical adds one additional moment of incarceration prior to the trial. After the arrest, the scene changes and lights come up on Max alone in a holding cell. The illusion of a small, confined space on a Broadway stage is created by two sets of prison bars at a forty-five-degree angle pointed upstage. In the cell, there is only a cot and a sink. When Max receives a postcard from Leo who has run off to Rio with Ulla, he launches into a broad eleven o'clock number called "Betrayed." The image of male protagonist singing alone in a jail cell is a convention made popular by "Close Every Door" in *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* with its productions and tours throughout the 1980s and 1990s. In fact, this new number written for the musical version of *The Producers* seems to intentionally reference this connection by repeatedly drawing on biblical betrayals as examples: Cain and Abel, Samson and Delilah, and Judas. Max, whose last name is Bialystock and who frequently uses overt Jewish and Yiddish phrases, refers to himself as a "rabbi without a shul"³⁶ and interjects "oy" as he sings to Jewish-inflected music in the minor mode, or as one reviewer called it, "Brooks's klezmer-like laments."³⁷ As he reaches the dramatic conclusion of the number, chasing string lights illuminate the perimeter of his jail cell bars, the kind of tongue-in-cheek kitsch that has been a hallmark of the production, turning even a grim holding cell into a glitzy bit of showbiz.

Prison was also the final setting of the film, but the ending of the musical adaptation of *The Producers* differs in a few important ways. In the film, after the jury's verdict ("incredibly guilty") and the judge has heard statements from Leo and Max (including Max's assertion that

³⁶ Brooks and Meehan, *The Producers*, 205.

³⁷ Howard Kissel, "Howard Kissel, "Such a Production!" *New York Daily News*, April 20, 2001.

they are very sorry and will never do it again), the scene cuts immediately to an unidentified state penitentiary, without the judge pronouncing a sentence. In prison, the inmates are rehearsing *Prisoners of Love* and Leo is selling inflated shares in the prison musical to fellow inmates and even one of the guards on behalf of the prison warden. In the final shot, Max is rehearsing the titular musical number with the inmates, who are dressed in charcoal gray jumpsuits and matching caps, inmate numbers on their chest, as they hold canes and dance in a kick line. The fate of Max and Leo is left vague, leaving the audience wondering how long they will be in prison and what will become of them afterward, assuming they are eventually released. In the musical, however, the judge pronounces Max and Leo's sentence: five years in the state penitentiary at Sing Sing. The men are dragged offstage amid screams of horror, emphasizing the grim fate of being sent to prison.

Sing Sing Correctional Facility is a maximum-security prison for incarcerated males in Westchester County, about thirty miles north of New York City.³⁸ Located right on the banks of the Hudson River, it is the origin of the phrase "sent up the river" as well as "the big house," as it was the largest cell block in the world at the time of its construction in 1825.³⁹ The property is divided by the Metro-North and Hudson train lines in and out of Manhattan, meaning that travelers to the city from the north literally pass through the prison grounds on their way to New York. The name Sing Sing, aside from being a happy accident for a comedic musical about musical theater producers sent to prison, is a disambiguation of "Sint Sinck," the indigenous name for the village meaning "stone on stone," referring to the plentiful limestone beds in the

³⁸ "Sing Sing Correctional Facility," Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, New York State, accessed July 7, 2024, <https://doccs.ny.gov/location/sing-sing-correctional-facility>.

³⁹ "Historic Facts," Sing Sing Prison Museum, accessed July 7, 2024, <https://www.singsingprisonmuseum.org/quick-facts.html>.

area.⁴⁰ This stone was used to build the first cellblocks for the prison in 1825 using inmate labor.⁴¹ Since that time, the prison has been home to many notorious criminals, including Soviet spies Julius and Ethel Rosenberg who were executed there in 1953, the first of a woman by the U.S. government since 1865.⁴² Despite numerous calls over the years to shut down the facility and make use of its prime real estate, with promises of closure going all the way back to Governor Hugh Carey in 1975, the prison remains in operation today.⁴³ Modern audiences outside New York would potentially still recognize its memorable name, as the prison is frequently referenced in New York based television procedural crime dramas like those in the *Law & Order* franchise⁴⁴ and even used for filming.⁴⁵ In fact, *Law & Order: SVU* star Ice T gave a TED talk at TEDxSingSing in 2015.⁴⁶ When Max and Leo are sent to Sing Sing at the end of *The Producers*, Broadway audiences would have laughed at the coincidence of the song-like name of a prison they likely knew well.

⁴⁰ William Joseph Reynolds, "Ossining, A Brief History," The Village of Ossining New York, accessed July 7, 2024, <https://www.villageofossining.org/about/pages/ossining-brief-history>.

⁴¹ "History," Sing Sing Prison Museum, accessed July 7, 2024, <https://www.singsingprisonmuseum.org/history-of-sing-sing-prison.html>.

⁴² J. Philip Jenkins, "Julius Rosenberg and Ethel Rosenberg," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, May 30, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Julius-Rosenberg-and-Ethel-Rosenberg>.

⁴³ Brendan Scott, "'Up the River' Views: Sing Sing Condos," *New York Post*, April 6, 2011, <https://nypost.com/2011/04/06/up-the-river-views-sing-sing-condos/>.

⁴⁴ "Sing Sing," *Law & Order Wiki*, Fandom.com, accessed July 7, 2024, https://lawandorder.fandom.com/wiki/Sing_Sing.

⁴⁵ Latoya West, "'Law & Order: SVU' filming in Ossining," *Lohud*, April 20, 2015, <https://lohud.com/story/suburbarazzi/2015/04/20/law-and-order-svu-filming-in-ossining/26081547/>.

⁴⁶ Ice T, "Suwiving on the Inside," TEDxSingSing, YouTube video, 16:17, Feb 18, 2015, <https://youtu.be/5AN5fPFtV0U?si=aJXSJ4XxVJv5RRID>.

As the scene transitions from the court room, lights come up on inmates singing from a score as if learning the song “Prisoners of Love.” The musical number opens with a sequence of sung declarations from individual inmates exclaiming, “Gotta sing, sing!” Behind them is a painted drop depicting three stories of dingy prison cells with “Sing Sing” written at the top. The song “Prisoners of Love” was written for the film and remains essentially unchanged for the stage musical. It makes light of the incarcerated status of the performers by using prison as a metaphor for the quintessential subject of musical comedy: romance. The typical AABA refrain uses three-line stanzas for each of the A-sections, each beginning with the song’s title text and landing on the somewhat dissonant flatted sixth, followed by an identical melodic gesture featuring a trite romantic rhyme (“blue skies above,” “our turtledoves”), and finally a third contrasting and ascending melodic phrase containing a reference to incarceration (“can’t keep our hearts in jail,” and “soon coming ‘round with bail”) (see Figure 10). The first A is in the tonic key followed by the second A in the relative minor. With a sequence of two descending scales, the B-section juxtaposes imprisonment with freedom: “Oh you can lock us up and lose the key / But hearts in love are always free.” The final A-section includes a cadential extension that repeats the final phrase “we’re still prisoners” three times, comically driving home not the inmates’ love but their carceral status.

Figure 10: “Prisoners of Love” melody (with finale lyrics)⁴⁷

Pris-'ners of love, Blue skies a bove, Can't keep our hearts in jail!
 Le - o and Max Up off our backs, Back on The Great White Way!

⁴⁷ When the “Prisoners of Love” theme returns in the finale, it is transposed to E major.

As in the film, Leo sells shares in the production while Max barks orders to the singing and dancing inmates, shouting “Let ‘em hear you in solitary” and “We open in Leavenworth Saturday night!” Here, Max could be referring to one of five penitentiaries built on federal land in Leavenworth, Kansas, which had become synonymous with the word “prison” through numerous film references throughout the twentieth century.⁴⁸ Indeed, the Leavenworth line was included as the final spoken line in Brooks’s original 1967 film of *The Producers*. The United States Federal Penitentiary at Leavenworth was the largest maximum-security prison in the country until it was downgraded to a medium-security Federal Corrections Institution in 2005.⁴⁹ Since opening in the early twentieth century, the prison has been home to some of the most famous and notorious federal prisoners in history, including Robert Stroud, better known as the “Birdman of Alcatraz,” George “Machine Gun” Kelly, polar explorer Dr. Frederick Cook, labor leader “Big Bill” Haywood, boxing champion Jack Johnson, gambler Nicky Arnstein, and Native American activist Leonard Peltier.⁵⁰ Leavenworth, Kansas is also home to the United States Disciplinary Barracks at Fort Leavenworth, the military’s only maximum-security prison for male military personnel.⁵¹ At the time of *The Producers*, the facility, which was over one hundred twenty years old, had recently been in national headlines, as the army had announced

⁴⁸ “U.S. Penitentiary & USDB,” Convention and Visitors Bureau of Leavenworth, Kansas, accessed July 9, 2024, <https://www.visitleavenworthks.com/visitors/page/us-penitentiary-usdb>.

⁴⁹ “United States Federal Penitentiary, Leavenworth, Kansas,” Convention and Visitors Bureau of Leavenworth, Kansas, accessed July 9, 2024, <https://www.visitleavenworthks.com/visitors/page/united-states-federal-penitentiary>.

⁵⁰ Tim Rives and Steve Spence, “68,937 and Counting: Searching Inmate Case Files from the U.S. Penitentiary at Leavenworth, Kansas,” *Prologue: Quarterly of the National Archives and Records Administration* 42, no. 2 (Summer 2010), <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2010/summer/leavenworth.html>.

⁵¹ “Army Corrections Command: Fort Leavenworth,” Units/Tenants, U.S. Army Fort Leavenworth, accessed July 9, 2024, <https://home.army.mil/leavenworth/units-tenants/army-corrections-command>.

plans to build a new facility in 1994, with construction taking place between July 1998 and August 2002, during the development and run of *The Producers*.⁵²

The fact that Sing Sing and Leavenworth were both maximum-security facilities is ironic given the non-violent nature of the financial crimes committed by Leo and Max. The musical seems to want to exaggerate and highlight the absurdity of their sentence, along with everything else in the musical. This exaggeration extends to their prison uniforms as well. The Sing Sing depicted in *The Producers* musical is full of inmates in dingy black-and-white-striped uniforms and caps. This is a strange anachronism, as the striped prison uniforms of the nineteenth century were abandoned in the early twentieth century.⁵³ At the time the musical is set (1959), prisoners would have worn a more muted solid color like the gray suits and caps depicted in the film version of *The Producers*.⁵⁴ That said, modern audiences in 2001 would likely have had another color in mind when conjuring the image of a prisoner: orange. Toward the end of the twentieth century, some correctional facilities did begin using orange, but it was not ubiquitous.⁵⁵ In fact, it was primarily used during transport, including to court appearances, which gave rise to a public perception that inmates wear orange. This was exacerbated by widely distributed images of detainees at Guantanamo Bay when they first arrived at the facility in January and February of

⁵² “Army Corrections Command: Fort Leavenworth.”

⁵³ John Pratt, *Punishment and Civilization: Penal Tolerance and Intolerance in Modern Society* (London: Sage Publishing, 2002), 70.

⁵⁴ Pratt, *Punishment and Civilization*, 70.

⁵⁵ Christopher Beam, “Orange Alert: When Did Prisoners Start Dressing in Orange?” *Slate*, December 3, 2010, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2010/12/when-did-prisoners-start-dressing-in-orange.html>.

2002.⁵⁶ So, while audiences might have had the image of orange in their minds for contemporary prisoners, the nostalgic image, accurate or not, of prisoners in black and white stripes mimicking prison bars won out in the costume design for the sequence at Sing Sing in *The Producers*. The black and white uniforms invoke a classic, pastiche, almost cartoon-like version of prison, in keeping with the musical's propensity for spoofs and comic homage.

Comedic exaggeration applies to the characterization of Max and Leo's fellow inmates, as well. While the two producers may be endearing, if not somewhat misguided, their attitude toward the other prisoners is one of disdain. In both the film and stage version, Max refers to the inmates as "animals." In the film, while the inmates are rehearsing the kick line, Max cries, "higher, you animals, higher!" In the musical, Max begins the Sing Sing sequence by calling out, "All right, you animals, break's over. Let's take it from the top."⁵⁷ It seems clear that in adapting Brooks's original screenplay, book writer Thomas Meehan felt it was important to keep the word "animals" despite slightly changing the line, dehumanizing the incarcerated criminals in same way media and politicians had done for decades.

The musical goes even further in spelling out the grisly character of the incarcerated men when the musical rehearsal is interrupted by an important announcement. In the most significant change to the ending from film to stage, Max and Leo receive a message from the governor that they have been pardoned for their crimes, apparently for cheering up the prison inmates with their musical *Prisoners of Love*. An inmate listed in the Broadway playbill as "Trustee" comes running in with the good news, and reads the following decree: "Gentlemen, you are hereby

⁵⁶ "Looking Back on Guantanamo Bay after 20 Years of the 'War on Terror'," *Reuters*, September 11, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/news/picture/looking-back-on-guantanamo-bay-after-20-idINRTXGVQ5R/>.

⁵⁷ Brooks and Meehan, *The Producers*, 216.

granted a full pardon for having—through song and dance—brought joy and laughter into the hearts of every murderer, rapist, and sex maniac in Sing Sing.”⁵⁸ The double emphasis on sex criminals (“rapist” *and* “sex maniac”) reflects the obsession with sex crimes in the 1990s (see Chapter 2) and reflects the contempt the governor supposedly feels for the inmates.

Meanwhile, the “Trustee” messenger is most likely a misspelling of “trusty,” referring to an old carceral system whereby certain prisoners (“trusties” or “trustee shooters”) were given special roles and responsibilities. This often resulted in horrific abuses of power that led to the abolishment of the system in *Gates v. Collier* in 1974 after a particularly egregious situation at Parchman Farm prison in Mississippi.⁵⁹ While the system had long been out of practice by 2001, it would have been in place in 1959, including in New York. The choice to designate this gleeful messenger who bounds enthusiastically onto the stage to deliver the good news a “trusty” demonstrates the comically satirical point of view of *The Producers* with regard to the criminal justice system.⁶⁰

Yet, the misspelling of “trusty” as “trustee” in the Broadway playbill could also be indicative of an era where the latter spelling might have been more relevant to the prison system. An *Atlantic Monthly* cover story by Eric Schlosser in 1998 outlined the prison-industrial

⁵⁸ Brooks and Meehan, *The Producers*, 217.

⁵⁹ “The Lasting Legacy of Parchman Farm, the Prison Modeled After a Slave Plantation,” News, The Innocence Project, May 29, 2020, <https://innocenceproject.org/the-lasting-legacy-of-parchman-farm-the-prison-modeled-after-a-slave-plantation/>.

⁶⁰ The published version of the script in the coffee table book of *The Producers* changes the title of the person saying this line to “Prison Guard,” perhaps in an attempt to smooth over some of the controversy I have outlined here. That said, the actor who says this line in the original Broadway production is not a guard; he is wearing a prison uniform like the rest of the inmates.

complex for American readers.⁶¹ Schlosser explains that beyond private prisons, the prison-industrial complex includes those who financially benefit from supplying goods and consulting for all aspects of the criminal justice system, including jails, prisons, parole, and probation. Additionally, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, a series of Initial Public Offerings (IPOs), beginning with Corrections Corporation of America in 1986, allowed investors (“trustees”) to hold financial stake in the prison industry.⁶² Further, in 2001 the United States Government established the Office of the Federal Detention Trustee to “direct resources and implement programmatic changes . . . to [realize] cost savings and [gain] efficiency.”⁶³ After September 11, the office put forth a comprehensive National Detention Strategy to expand local jail space to meet the needs of ICE, the U.S. Marshals Service, and the Bureau of Prisons.⁶⁴ Whether trusty or trustee, *The Producers* intended to make light of a very serious and disturbing subject, using comedy to defray tension around the issue of the prison-industrial complex in America by suggesting that song and dance could exonerate criminals.

The finale of the Broadway musical *The Producers* is the embodiment of the decades-long trend of prison musicals at the end of the twentieth century: the success of a prison musical on Broadway. After the trusty/trustee delivers the good news of the pardon, Max cries out, “Next stop, *Prisoners of Love* on Broadway!” The inmates joyfully follow Max and Leo offstage

⁶¹ Eric Schlosser, “The Prison-Industrial Complex,” *The Atlantic* 282, no. 2 (December 1998).

⁶² Donna Selman and Paul Leighton, *Punishment for Sale: Private Prisons, Big Business, and the Incarceration Binge* (Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 81–86.

⁶³ “Office of the Federal Detention Trustee Homepage,” United States Department of Justice, accessed July 9, 2024, <https://www.justice.gov/archive/ofdt/index.html>.

⁶⁴ Jack Norton and Jacob Kang-Brown, “If You Build It: How the Federal Government Fuels Rural Jail Expansion,” In Our Backyard Stories, Vera Institute of Justice, January 10, 2020, <https://www.vera.org/in-our-backyards-stories/if-you-build-it>.

singing and kicking as they go. As they do, the dingy backdrop of Sing Sing prison flies out to reveal another, nearly identical drop, only painted in bright and cheerful colors (what the script calls “a Broadway version of Sing Sing”). At the same time, Ulla strides onto the stage leading a parade of chorus girls the script describes as “scantly clad in glitzy and very abbreviated Broadway versions of striped chain-gang convict uniforms.”⁶⁵ The Broadway costumes, created by William Ivey Long who had worked with Stroman on *Contact*, consist of sleeved dresses of extremely short length in black and white horizontal stripes and topped with black caps. The dresses are sequined and sparkle in the stage lighting. The women wear high heels and are swinging balls on chains attached to their right ankle. This absurd (and anachronistic) exaggeration of prison, even in 1959, is a kind of evolution of the exaggeration of the “real” Sing Sing prison depicted just moments ago. It is an exaggeration of an exaggeration, all in the name of what it means to create a “Broadway” version of something. As one reviewer put it, it is “the spectacle of Broadway mocking the spectacle of Broadway.”⁶⁶ The male chorus joins the women onstage having donned their own sequined versions of their prison uniforms. It is unclear whether these are indeed meant to be the very same Sing Sing inmates from the previous scene. The hilarious absurdity and suspension of disbelief inherent in this Broadway musical makes anything possible. In Stroman’s choreography, the women swing their balls around in the air on their chains while the men duck to avoid being hit. As the drop flies out to reveal the theater marquee and the chorus files into the stage door, one male chorus inmate does a roundoff into back handsprings across the stage in his sparkling prison uniform. *The Producers* is a parody of

⁶⁵ Brooks and Meehan, *Producers*, 218. Once again, the idea of a chain gang, fundamental to *Les Misérables* and depicted in *Parade*, is evoked again here in *The Producers* for comedic effect.

⁶⁶ “Springtime for Show Biz,” uncredited *New York Times* editorial, May 9, 2001.

the Broadway industry, one that highlights the success of the prison trope in musical theater by not only depicting prison for its own characters, but depicting the success of prison musicals on Broadway when those same incarcerated criminals write a successful musical based on their prison experience.

In contrast to the ambiguous ending of the film, the musical ends with an exonerated Max and Leo returning to their careers unscathed. Singing a contrafactum of “Prisoners of Love” (“Leo and Max”), the two men close the show by singing how they are “up off our backs,” “back on our tracks,” and “back on top to stay” (see Figure 10).⁶⁷ Whether the men have truly learned their lesson and changed their ways is left up to interpretation. They tell the audience, “When we take your money, never fear” as they point to the illuminated marquees with groan-worthy puns for titles, mostly based on Jewish tropes. In the final moments, the two men dance with top hats and canes, miming a golf drive into the audience, before turning to walk upstage with their arms around each other’s shoulders as silhouettes in a sunset, while the angelic chorus sings, “The Producers: Leo and Max.” Multiple reviewers noted that the stage musical had a stronger ending than the film. The idea of these incorrigible yet lovable men walking free would have had great resonance for American theatergoers after the Clinton impeachment, whose acquittal in the Senate allowed Clinton to finish out his term with broad popularity despite the scandal.

Reception: “Where Did We Go Right?”

In the scene immediately following the surprise smash success of *Springtime for Hitler*, Max and Leo come back to their office, incredulous at the rave reviews, and sing the song “Where Did We Go Right?” Like the fictional musical central to its plot, *The Producers* was also

⁶⁷ Brooks and Meehan, *Producers*, 220.

an immediate success, not only because of its stars, but because of its content. To be sure, the name recognition of the film itself, writer Mel Brooks, director and choreographer Susan Stroman, along with blockbuster stars Nathan Lane and Matthew Broderick in the lead roles, attracted audiences in droves. Reviews generally commented on the “lamentable . . . impossibility of getting tickets”⁶⁸ and described the “unobtainable seat . . . [to] the most exclusive ticket in town.”⁶⁹ But though the name recognition may have been part of what got people in the door, the content seemed to resonate with audiences as well. Writing for *Variety*, Charles Isherwood wrote, “starved for brassy, take-no-prisoners comedy on Broadway, audiences are devouring the show, lapping up the hoary jokes and pratfalls as if they were manna from heaven. . . . Broadway is increasingly divided between highbrow plays and bland, family-friendly musical spectacles, with the occasional highbrow musical valiantly striving to marry the two extremes, usually to leaden results. . . . [The *Producers* is] a highly accomplished piece of lowdown entertainment. And how delicious that a show about the attempted detonation of a Broadway bomb should become the first Broadway smash of the new century.”⁷⁰ What delighted audiences was *The Producers*’ meta, self-awareness. It was a surprisingly successful, offensive musical about an offensive musical being a surprise success. It was also a successful new prison musical about the success of a new prison musical.

The musical set records in numerous ways, including its ticket prices. Amy Gamerman of the *Wall Street Journal* fittingly honed in on the high prices, writing that “The unblushing greed of the show's producers, who promptly raised the top ticket price to \$100 as soon as the show

⁶⁸ Ben Brantley, “A Scam that’ll Knock ‘Em Dead,” *New York Times*, April 20, 2001.

⁶⁹ “Springtime for Show Biz.”

⁷⁰ Charles Isherwood, “Swing Time for Hitler: Producers a Knockout” *Variety*, April 23, 2001.

opened, rivals any of the unscrupulous antics of *The Producers*.”⁷¹ John Lahr of *The New Yorker* took a slightly more measured stance, highlighting the unprecedented nature of the show’s immediate success while still emphasizing the way life was imitating art:

After opening night, in the spirit of the craven avidity that characterizes Brooks’s fictional producers, Max Bialystock and Leo Bloom, the show’s real producers hiked the ticket price to an all-time Broadway high of a hundred dollars, added two computers to the theatre’s lobby, and commandeered two more box offices at the Shubert theatres across from the St. James to accommodate overflow business. The Telecharge lines were jammed; and, among Broadway swamis, all of this was a sure sign that a gusher—so rare in recent years—had been struck. On the day after it opened *The Producers* sold thirty-three thousand five hundred and ninety-eight tickets, taking in a total of \$3,029,197 (it will recoup its eleven-million-dollar investment—almost twelve times the cost of the movie—in thirty-six weeks); these are the biggest numbers ever in the history of Broadway.⁷²

These numbers would continue to climb after opening. The show’s executives would ultimately introduce a premium orchestra tier at \$480 a ticket, prompting other theaters to follow suit with their own premium seats. As Nathan Hurwitz writes, “In some ways, the \$480 theater ticket for *The Producers* was as clear a sign of the times as the success of the show.”⁷³

Reviewers also noted that the musical felt right for the moment, claiming, “Everything smacks of 2001, not 1951 or whenever Mel Brooks and Ms. Stroman have set this farce.”⁷⁴ Writing for *Time Out New York*, Jason Zinoman wrote, “Mel Brooks’s unapologetically crass movie . . . was ahead of its time, but tastes (and tastelessness) have changed. Brooks’s dynamite

⁷¹ Amy Gamerman, “Mel Brooks’s *The Producers* Puts Sheer, Exuberant Fun Back On the Great White Way,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 25, 2001.

⁷² John Lahr, “Gold Rush,” *New Yorker*, May 7, 2001.

⁷³ Nathan Hurwitz, *A History of the American Musical*, 228.

⁷⁴ Anna Kisselgoff, “The Producers,” *New York Times*, June 29, 2001.

musical version of *The Producers* now sits squarely in the mainstream.”⁷⁵ Audiences seemed to love a musical that was, “loud, crass, foolish and happily defiant about the thinning skins of political correctness.”⁷⁶ Reviewers could not help but relate the content and success of *The Producers* to the political moment, with one reviewer even suggesting Mel Brooks should run for mayor of New York City: “[Brooks] can surely carry off the much easier task of running New York. . . .Imagine what Brooks could bring to a mayoral race that promises to be so dreary they’ll probably close it out of town.”⁷⁷ Here, Howard Kissel is referring to the flip-flopping of Democrat Michael Bloomberg to run as a Republican candidate for Mayor after Rudy Giuliani’s term limit was reached. Despite Bloomberg’s party ambiguity, he would narrowly defeat Democrat Mark Green that November. But other reviewers linked *The Producers* to presidential politics as well, citing dissatisfaction with newly-installed President George W. Bush. John Lahr closed his *New Yorker* piece by suggesting, “If our President won't sign up for the Kyoto agreement to protect the atmosphere, we can still sign up for the Brooks agreement, which is sure to protect our inner environment. The pact goes like this: We are polluted by grief and greed; let’s acknowledge it, defy it, meet the inevitable vulgar annihilation with careless vulgar rapture, and, with the last measure of our energy and imagination, refuse darkness its dominion.”⁷⁸

Little did Lahr know the grief that audiences would be experiencing in just a few months. The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center towers in Manhattan on September 11, 2001 would have profound impacts on New York City and the Broadway industry. Despite resuming

⁷⁵ Jason Zinoman, “The Producers,” *Time Out New York*, April 26, 2001.

⁷⁶ Linda Winer, “The Producers,” *Newsday*, April 2001.

⁷⁷ Howard Kissel, “Such a Production!” *New York Daily News*, April 20, 2001.

⁷⁸ Lahr, “Gold Rush.”

performances just forty-eight hours after the tragedy, low audience turnout meant Broadway had one of the worst financial weeks in its history, with losses between three and five million dollars.⁷⁹ On Friday, September 21, 2001, the *New York Times* reported that five shows were closing that weekend, with several others “wobbling dangerously near the edge,” not to mention many off-Broadway productions. Broadway executives had begun discussing the possibility of a bailout with the city, but were told to see what remedies and stop-gaps could be implemented internally. In response to what would certainly continue to be difficult economic times, unions for performers and stagehands negotiated a twenty-five percent reduction in wages for five of the most successful and long-running musicals on Broadway for four weeks (this did not include *The Producers*, which was still working to recoup its initial investment). The article also reported that there would be heightened security at the theaters, from bag searches to canine bomb squads. Meanwhile, in an effort to incentivize audiences to purchase theater tickets, the League of American Theaters and Producers agreed to make a donation of five dollars to the city’s Twin Towers Fund from every ticket sold through September 30 for performances through the month of October. This was part of a broader industry-wide marketing campaign to draw audiences back to the theater using movie trailers, print and radio advertisements, and a now iconic television commercial.

The cast of *The Producers* was integral to the “I Love New York” television ad coaxing hesitant tourists back to New York and to the theater after 9/11, just as it had been doing since the late 1970s (see Chapter 1).⁸⁰ What began as an advertising campaign to combat the image of

⁷⁹ Jesse McKinley, “Broadway Is in the War All the Way,” *New York Times*, September 21, 2001.

⁸⁰ Casey Mink, “How a TV Ad Enticed Broadway Crowds Right After 9/11,” *New York Times*, September 9, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/09/theater/9-11-broadway-new-york-commercial.html>.

a dangerous, crime-ridden “Fear City” would become a beacon of hope and a testament to the persistence of a city in the wake of violent terror. On September 28, 2001, a group of Broadway performers gathered to perform a rendition of Kander and Ebb’s “New York, New York” in Times Square. Standing in the front row of the performers was *The Producers* star Nathan Lane, whose voice is heard in the final seconds of the ad saying boldly, “Come to New York, and let’s go on with the show!”⁸¹ After 9/11, then mayor of New York City Rudy Giuliani had insisted that Broadway reopen as soon as possible, and the Broadway league agreed to reopen theaters on Thursday, September 13.⁸² In fact, according to Drew Hodges, founder of SpotCo advertising agency, who made the ad, it was supposed to be Giuliani who made the final beckoning plea in the commercial, not Lane. “It felt wrong to be going back so quickly. And yet we were trying to do something positive,” recalled Lane.⁸³ In the wake of unimaginable tragedy and fear, when America was feeling vulnerable and worried about the state of national security, the “positive” thing to do was to come to the theater and laugh, even if it meant further examining its own grim relationship with crime and incarceration. Susan Stroman likewise admitted that while “at first it seemed inappropriate that people should laugh,” this changed over time and “in fact it became almost like medicine, it became like a tonic.”⁸⁴ She felt that the comedic escapism of *The Producers* was a way for audiences to heal and get relief from their grief, while continuing to laugh at the state of affairs in the American social and political landscape, even after a traumatic

⁸¹ [broadwayarchive](https://broadwayarchive.com/), “I Love New York – Broadway Commercial,” produced by The League of American Theatres and Producers, Inc. in 2001, YouTube video, 0:30, February 8, 2012, <https://youtu.be/PEZbIFqsVD8?si=2F1LgvqkO0T-M-zw>.

⁸² Mink, “TV Ad.”

⁸³ Mink, “TV Ad.”

⁸⁴ Stroman, interview with Michael Kantor.

terrorist attack. The incarcerated chorus at the end of *The Producers* would take on new poignancy in the months and years following 9/11, as a new kind of prisoner took center stage: the terrorist.

The War on Terror

In the months following September 11, the *New York Times* began running a regular series under the banner “A Nation Challenged.” On November 25, the *Times* reported that the tribunals planned by the military for suspected terrorists were shrouded in secrecy, with one military officer saying the details could be kept from the public for years or even decades.⁸⁵ These tribunals were rumored to be taking place on naval ships at sea or at offshore naval bases like Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. This is the first mention of the site in the *Times* following the attack. The article characterizes these “swift and largely secret” tribunals, rather than federal court trials, as “the boldest initiative in a series of laws and rewritten federal regulations that, taken together, have created an alternate system of justice in the aftermath of Sept. 11, giving the government far greater power to detain, investigate and prosecute people suspected of involvement in terrorism.” In particular, these new regulations would impact noncitizens living in the U.S. who had nevertheless previously held the same constitutional rights and protections. By late November, more than twelve hundred foreigners had been detained as part of the government’s investigation into the terrorist attacks and a further five thousand Middle Eastern men had been flagged for interview, a move widely criticized as ethnic profiling.⁸⁶ The article

⁸⁵ Matthew Purdy, “Bush’s New Rules to Fight Terror Transform the Legal Landscape,” *New York Times*, November 25, 2001.

⁸⁶ Purdy, “Bush’s New Rules.” See also: Jodi Wilgoren, “Swept Up in a Dragnet, Hundreds Sit in Custody and Ask, ‘Why?’” *New York Times*, November 25, 2001.

reported a recent rule change “published without announcement” that gave the government the ability to keep noncitizens in detention even when an immigration judge had ordered them freed. Public polling at the time indicated support for these measures, and the Bush administration boasted their popularity despite concerns at home and in the international community. By late December, President Bush was defending the approach to the tribunals by saying it would be “more fair than the system of Bin Laden and the Taliban,” and that “the prisoners that we capture will be given a heck-of-a-lot better chance in court than those citizens of ours who were in the World Trade Center or in the Pentagon were given by Mr. Bin Laden.”⁸⁷

By late December, it was confirmed that the U.S. was establishing a detention center at the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba for alleged Afghan terrorists.⁸⁸ The location was reportedly chosen because it was remote, far from civilian populations, and not part of U.S. territory. By comparison, Guam had previously been ruled out as a possible location because, in addition to protests from residents there, the fact that it was American territory meant prisoners there might have qualified for the same rights as defendants in the United States. This was not the case in Cuba. Cuban officials condemned the plan.⁸⁹ By early January, American military troops had arrived in Cuba to begin building maximum-security prison cells to accommodate the Afghan prisoners.⁹⁰ Secrecy around the project remained a top priority, and it was suggested that press media would not be allowed on site once the prisoners arrived. When the first twenty

⁸⁷ The Associated Press, “Bush Says Terrorists Will Get Better Treatment Than Those Killed Sept. 11,” *New York Times*, December 28, 2001.

⁸⁸ Katharine Q. Seelye, “U.S. to Hold Taliban Detainees in ‘the Least Worst Place,’” *New York Times*, December 28, 2001.

⁸⁹ Reuters, “Cuba Criticizes Plan,” *New York Times*, December 30, 2001.

⁹⁰ Katharine Q. Seelye, “Troops Arrive at Base in Cuba to Build Jails,” *New York Times*, January 7, 2002.

prisoners arrived on January 12, 2002 at what had been named Camp X-Ray, Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld referred to them as “unlawful combatants” rather than “prisoners of war,” because “unlawful combatants do not have any rights under the Geneva Convention,” though he assured the press that they would likely be handling the detainees in rough accordance with the Geneva Convention guidelines.⁹¹ The men were reportedly wearing two-piece orange prison uniforms, and were transported in shackles and wearing goggles that had been taped over to obstruct their view.⁹² While journalists from CNN and *The Miami Herald* were allowed to be present at the site, the military forbade the reporters from taking photographs.⁹³ Instead, photographs originally intended only for the eyes of the Pentagon were taken by naval photographer Petty Officer First Class Shane T. McCoy. A carefully selected group of five of these images were eventually released by the U.S. Department of Defense after pressure from the press.⁹⁴ One particularly iconic image showed a full view of the first twenty detainees in a fenced, open-air compound topped with barbed wire, kneeling, shackled, with their heads bowed. Due to the limited supply of imagery, this photograph was subsequently published over and over by a myriad of news outlets whenever referring to Guantanamo Bay, and ultimately came to represent the U.S. detention policy in general after September 11.

⁹¹ Katharine Q. Seelye, “First ‘Unlawful Combatants’ Seized in Afghanistan Arrive at U.S. Base in Cuba,” *New York Times*, January 12, 2002.

⁹² Reuters, “A Second Group of Detainees Arrives at Base,” *New York Times*, January 14, 2002.

⁹³ Carol Rosenberg, “The Secret Pentagon Photos of the First Prisoners at Guantánamo Bay,” *New York Times*, June 12, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/06/12/us/guantanamo-bay-pentagon-photos.html>.

⁹⁴ Carole Rosenberg, “20 Years Later, the Story Behind the Guantánamo Photo That Won’t Go Away,” *New York Times*, January 10, 2022.

Many of the rule changes that allowed for this treatment of the detainees at Gauntanamo Bay were the result of the USA PATRIOT Act, passed hastily after the attacks of September 11. Its full acronym reveals its scope: Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001. Aimed at combating terrorism, the law increased punishments for terrorism and expanded its definition by adding additional crimes to the list. The bill also significantly expanded government surveillance of phones, emails, and bank records, including on U.S. citizens, using tactics previously reserved only for foreign entities.⁹⁵ With regard to detention, the bill allowed for the indefinite detention of immigrants suspected of being associated with terrorist activities. Academics and politicians decried these provisions as invasions of privacy and violations of civil rights. Speaking on the Senate floor, Russ Feingold (D-Wisconsin), the only U.S. Senator to vote “no” on the bill, said, “Our system normally requires higher standards of proof for a deprivation of liberty. . . . We must maintain our vigilance to preserve our laws and our basic rights. We in this body have a duty to analyze, to test, to weigh new laws that the zealous and often sincere advocates of security would suggest to us.”⁹⁶ It was clear Feingold and others felt the majority of Congress were derelict in this duty, with one resounding critique of the bill’s hasty passage being that most members of Congress had not actually read the bill. Laura Murphy, director of the Washington office of the

⁹⁵ Joerdis Schuessler, “Patriot Act,” in *Criminal Justice in America: The Encyclopedia of Crime, Law Enforcement, Courts, and Corrections*, vol. 2, edited by Carla Lewandowski and Jeff Bumgarner (New York: ABC-CLIO, 2019).

⁹⁶ “Statement Of U.S. Senator Russ Feingold on The Anti-Terrorism Bill,” October 25, 2001, Electronic Privacy Information Center, <https://archive.epic.org/privacy/terrorism/usapatriot/feingold.html>. Also available through the 9/11 Memorial Museum website, “Debate in the Senate on the USA PATRIOT Act of 2001,” https://www.911memorial.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/2001%20oct%2C25%20Debate%20in%20the%20Senate%20on%20the%20USA%20PATRIOT%20Act%20of%202001_selections.pdf.

American Civil Liberties Union, wrote a letter to House members outlining the rushed, back-room nature of the bill's drafting. Though proponents argued the imminent threat of terrorism warranted the hasty passage of the bill, Murphy wrote, "We find it deeply disturbing that once again the full House will be forced to vote on legislation that Members have not had the opportunity to read."⁹⁷ Among the provisions she cited as most alarming were that the bill would lead to large-scale investigations of American citizens for "intelligence" purposes and use intelligence authorities to by-pass probable cause requirements in criminal cases. Murphy also highlighted the fact that the act would put the CIA and other intelligence agencies back in the business of spying on Americans by giving the Director of Central Intelligence the authority to identify priority targets for intelligence surveillance in the United States. When the bill passed and was signed into law by George W. Bush on October 26, 2001, Americans lost significant civil rights and liberties to a government that could now legally spy on them.

Urinetown

The first musical to open on Broadway after 9/11 was *Urinetown*. In fact, *Urinetown*, which had begun Broadway previews on August 27, 2001, was originally scheduled to open on September 13. After the attack, the production delayed its official opening until September 20. Bruce Weber's review for the *New York Times*, published the day after, highlights the unexpected new context for a show that had been developed over the last couple of years with no idea of what would occur on September 11, 2001. He writes:

⁹⁷ Laura Murphy, "Letter to the House Urging Rejection on the Final Version of the USA PATRIOT Act," American Civil Liberties Union, October 23, 2001, <https://www.aclu.org/documents/letter-house-urging-rejection-final-version-usa-patriot-act>.

It is impossible to ignore the solemnity of current events, from which the show is not entirely a distraction. . . .Beneath its cartoonish surface it tiptoes thematically along the edge of the grave issues that are now consuming everyone. It tells a story, after all, that presents innocent people victimized by conscienceless evil, kills off characters by having them thrown from a skyscraper, debates the appropriateness of murderous vengeance, illustrates the rage of those who suffer in poverty and perceive cruelty in capitalism and in the end decries the presumption and wastefulness of people who don't recognize that they are privileged.⁹⁸

Despite the amplified resonance the musical would have following 9/11, the musical was nevertheless conceived several years prior, already responding to the police state, mass incarceration, and corrupt politics of the 1990s.

Urinetown was conceived and written by Greg Kotis, who studied political science at the University of Chicago, but dropped out to pursue theater. He eventually joined the Neo-Futurists, an experimental theater troupe dedicated to improvisation and randomness, and established a branch in New York City with his wife in 1995. Kotis's love of politics and acting first intersected when he worked as a location scout for the hit television crime drama *Law & Order*.⁹⁹ Kotis got the idea for *Urinetown* while traveling abroad in Paris and having to choose between spending his pocket change on food or to gain access to a public toilet, a situation he found "twisted and surreal."¹⁰⁰ The musical, with music and lyrics by composer Mark Hollmann, is a Brechtian-inspired satirical musical that critiques politics, the legal system, capitalism, corporate greed, and climate change. Its plot and aesthetic closely resemble Kurt Weill's *The Threepenny Opera* and Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock*, particularly with regard to the poor working class rising up against the wealthy ruling class.

⁹⁸ Bruce Weber, "THEATER REVIEW; How Reality Affects a Play," *New York Times*, September 21, 2001.

⁹⁹ Lois Smith Brady, "Ayun Halliday and Greg Kotis," *New York Times*, May 21, 2006.

¹⁰⁰ Colin Moynihan, "Water, or the Lack of It, Inspires a Musical and Fills Seats," *New York Times*, August 29, 1999.

Set in a future dystopia, *Urinetown* imagines a society where ecological disaster has led water to become dangerously scarce, so much so that it is a closely regulated commodity overseen by the government. Private toilets are outlawed and citizens must pay to use public facilities. Those who are caught trying to avoid using the paid facilities are arrested and carted off to Urinetown, a mysterious and unknown fate. The main characters are a nod to the archetypal characters in *The Cradle Will Rock*, where steel worker and union driver named Larry Foreman rises up against a wealthy business executive named Mr. Mister. In *Urinetown* the cartoonishly corrupt Caldwell B. Cladwell, who runs Urine Good Company, is challenged by Bobby Strong, who works at one of the public amenities and decides to lead an uprising after his father is arrested. Unlike *The Cradle Will Rock*, the hero in *Urinetown* is captured and executed. Instead, it is his love interest, Hope Cladwell (Mr. Cladwell's daughter) who carries his mantle, overthrowing her own father. In an even more grim conclusion, Hope's efforts to liberate the people only lead to further ecological devastation and drought, resulting in her own murder at the hands of the people.

John Bush Jones has suggested that, like *The Producers*, *Urinetown* succeeds because it offers biting social commentary in a comedic package, one that also takes aim at musicals that previously took a more serious approach. He writes that the show "satirically raises serious questions about individual freedoms vs. monopolistic or totalitarian control, while it parodies socially relevant musicals [like *Parade*]." ¹⁰¹ Jones also suggests that perhaps the bleakness of *Urinetown*'s plot, particularly the grim ending, "is another way the show is spoofing those too-

¹⁰¹ John Bush Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theatre* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2003), 356.

solemn musicals that were its immediate predecessors.”¹⁰² *Urinetown* is comically self-referential in an overt way. In keeping with its Brechtian influence, most performers in the musical are aware of the audience and the fact that they are performing a show. The opening line spoken by Officer Lockstock, the show’s narrator, is: “Well, hello there. And welcome to *Urinetown*. Not the place, of course. The musical.”¹⁰³ John Heilpern of the *New York Observer* likened the production to *Forbidden Broadway*, the long-running spoof revue, in the way that *Urinetown* referenced *West Side Story*, Bob Fosse choreography, and the gospel revival number of classic musicals like *Guys and Dolls*.¹⁰⁴ Clive Barnes of the *New York Post* noted how the show’s “wild and happy mix of biting satire and loving parody” took aim at the pop operas of the day like *Les Misérables* and *Miss Saigon*: “The songs and anthems, the gospel touches, the Sondheim glances and the pop-opera pretensions are strangely attractive and effective. . . .It has a lot in common with that other parody—no, it’s not as funny—*The Producers*.”¹⁰⁵ While the musical is a send up of the form, it is first and foremost a critique of contemporary social issues that were top of mind for Broadway audiences at the end of the Clinton years: political corruption, crime, and policing.

Heilpern classified *Urinetown* as an “anti-musical,” grouping it with other satirical productions of the era. Larry Stempel has explored the concept of the antimusical in some depth, crediting producer Wiley Hausam with the term’s coinage—or, at the very least, an early

¹⁰² Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves*, 357.

¹⁰³ Greg Kotis and Mark Hollmann, *Urinetown: The Musical* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2003), 9.

¹⁰⁴ John Heilpern, “*Urinetown* Leaves Us Laughing at the Most Unexpected Things,” *New York Observer*, October 1, 2001.

¹⁰⁵ Clive Barnes, “*Urinetown* Pure Gold,” *New York Post*, September 21, 2001.

definition.¹⁰⁶ According to Hausam, an antimusical is one that goes against the grain of Broadway by eschewing catchy songs and happy endings, focusing on political concerns of the 1980s and 90s, and indicting the American dream. “Consequently,” he says, “the work is ironic, skeptical, and sometimes disenchanting and disbelieving. When it’s funny, it’s biting. It leaves teeth marks. Obviously, that’s no way to be popular.”¹⁰⁷ Stempel points out that due to their more acerbic social commentary, these musicals, like *Urinetown*, often played Off-Broadway (*Hello Again*, *Floyd Collins*, *Violet*, *The Last Five Years*), but that some, like *Urinetown*, gathered enough momentum to make the leap to Broadway despite addressing big social issues (*Jelly’s Last Jam* and *Falsettos*, which dealt with race and sexuality respectively). For *Urinetown*, one of these issues was policing.

Police State

The Clinton Crime Bill had added a hundred thousand police officers to the force at a time when American’s were obsessed with crime. *Urinetown*’s playwright Greg Kotis was working as a location scout for *Law & Order* when he wrote the show; his livelihood was literally dependent on America’s obsession with crime drama in the late 1990s. When developing the idea for the musical, Kotis imagined a dystopia where a single malevolent, monopolizing corporation controlled all toilets.¹⁰⁸ Further, this corporation would rely on government and law enforcement as part of its scheme: “It would pay off politicians and police . . . and generally

¹⁰⁶ Larry Stempel, *Showtime: A History of the Broadway Musical Theater* (New York: Norton, 2010), 657–59.

¹⁰⁷ Wiley Hausam, as quoted in Stempel, *Showtime*, 658.

¹⁰⁸ Kotis and Hollmann, *Urinetown*, xi.

employ all available tools of persuasion to maintain its hammerlock on power.”¹⁰⁹ The use of a policeman as a narrator impacted audiences early on. In the introduction to the published script, Kotis reflects on the audience reaction to the musical’s first incarnation at the New York International Fringe Festival in August 1999:

The lights went down, the cast took their positions, and Jay Rhoderick, our Officer Lockstock for the Fringe production, entered from the house and began talking to the audience. As quiet as the audience was, they grew quiet still; an actor dressed as a policeman was addressing them from the stage. There are many kinds of silence in the theater, some good, some not so good. This was a good silence, an alert silence—they were paying attention. . . . This, apparently, was not what the audience expected . . . certainly not from a show called *Urinetown*.¹¹⁰

In the Broadway production, the oppressive police state of *Urinetown* is evident before the performance begins.¹¹¹ While the audience takes their seats, spotlights pan around the auditorium. A uniformed police officer paces back and forth in the house right boxes, which are not open to patrons, but rather part of the playing space. The presence of law enforcement conveys to the audience that these roving lights are not the conventional spotlights of the theater. Rather, these are police searchlights panning for criminal activity in the shadows, the kind you might also see at a prison facility trying to catch an attempted escape. This preshow tactic establishes a connection for the audience between the spotlight and the searchlight, such that whenever a character is highlighted by the light, there is the sense that they are being watched, surveilled, or perhaps caught doing or saying something they should not. As Officer Lockstock

¹⁰⁹ Kotis and Hollmann, *Urinetown*, xi.

¹¹⁰ Kotis and Hollmann, *Urinetown*, xvii.

¹¹¹ *Urinetown*, filmed August 23, 2002, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Billy Rose Theatre Division, Theatre on Film and Tape Archive, NCOV 2642.

says in the opening lines of the show, *Urinetown* (both the place and the musical) is “filled with symbolism and things like that.”¹¹²

Soon, more police begin to arrive; they descend from the catwalks via ladders down into the theater boxes which are outfitted with horizontal metal bars. As they arrive, they head toward the proscenium where an elevated platform spans the width of the opening with two steep staircases leading down onto the stage. In this production, the police and the corrupt wealthy class are typically seen on the upper level, literally looking down on the poor groundlings on the stage. A man in modest dress and a flat cap descends to the stage, the first person the audience has seen who is not a cop. He sits at the piano downstage of the full band on stage right and brings in the orchestra; he is the conductor. At the end of the overture, a police officer comes up onto the stage from the aisle wielding a flashlight, another illuminating device that will play a significant role throughout the show. He introduces himself as Officer Lockstock, the narrator of the tale, whom Kotis describes as “the keystone of all our efforts . . . a murderously tough cop on the take.”¹¹³ The ubiquity of this corrupt policeman who guides the audience and its characters through the drama continually reinforces the omnipresence of police during the show. Lockstock’s first order of business is to introduce the opening number.

As with many titular opening numbers, “*Urinetown*” serves to establish the time and place, in this case a dystopian future where ecological disaster has made water so scarce that private toilets have been banned and citizens must pay to use public facilities. Lockstock explains this premise in his first vocal stanza, speaking directly to the audience in second person. He says to the audience if they (“you”) are caught peeing for free, “we’ll catch you,” and that

¹¹² Kotis and Hollmann, *Urinetown*, 9.

¹¹³ Kotis and Hollmann, *Urinetown*, xxiii.

they never fail, or bother with jail, singing, “You’ll get Urinetown / Off you’ll go to Urinetown / Away with you to Urinetown / You won’t need bail.”¹¹⁴ The question of where or what Urinetown actually is is a central question of most of the first act (and the title of the Act II opening number, discussed below). There is an air of mystery and secrecy around it, yet it seems clear that it is a fate for people who break the law, and not just related to public amenities. In the opening scene, two poor townspeople have an exchange where they talk about “Old So-and-So” getting carted off to Urinetown for “such-and such.” At one point in the first act, Little Sally asks Officer Lockstock what Urinetown is like. Lockstock replies, “I can’t tell you that,” and when Sally asks why, he says, “It’s a secret. That’s why not. Its power depends on mystery.”¹¹⁵ The mystery and secrecy surrounding the fictional Urinetown mirrors the classified nature of the establishment of the Guantanamo Bay detention camp in Cuba, established in January 2002, just months after the opening of *Urinetown* on Broadway. Audiences seeing *Urinetown* any time beyond the initial months of its multi-year run would have had Guantanamo in their mind as a mysterious, far-away detention center shrouded in secrecy.

One of the first scenes in *Urinetown* depicts the arrest of a supposed criminal. After the opening titular number, the following scene plays out at one of the most filthy, run-down public amenities in the land, which caters to the poor. A character named Old Man Strong, does not have quite enough money to afford to use the facility, and is pleading with Penelope Pennywise—a government appointee who takes the entrance fares at the amenity—to let him in. Old Man Strong is revealed to be the father of Bobby Strong, the show’s romantic hero, who assists Penny at the amenity. The situation prompts Penny to launch into a solo number titled,

¹¹⁴ Kotis and Hollmann, *Urinetown*, 11.

¹¹⁵ Kotis and Hollmann, *Urinetown*, 38.

“It’s a Privilege to Pee,” during which she recounts a bit of the history of how the system came to be and espouses her commitment to it. Penny extols the virtues of politicians, singing: “The politicians in their wisdom saw / That there should be a law. / The politicians taxed the toilets / And made illegal / Public urination and defecation”¹¹⁶ (see Figure 11).

Figure 11: “It’s a Privilege to Pee” excerpt

Pennywise:

The po - li - ti - cians in their wis - dom saw that there should
 be a law. The po - li - ti - cians taxed the toi - lets

Up to this point in the song, Penny’s vocal line has been speech-like, short phrases punctuated by periods of rest that live in a comfortably low range between C4–G4, with only a few notes extending higher for emphasis. However, when Penny begins singing about the politicians, the music grinds dramatically to a halt and her singing becomes more lyrical and operatic. On the first time she sings the word, “pol-” is set on a high E flat, the highest note of the song so far. Nancy Opel, who originated the role of Pennywise, displays an impressively powerful mix-belt as she shrieks the high note. As if this first outburst was not enough, she repeats the word “politicians,” this time beginning on a high G5. By setting the word “politicians” on these highest notes in the song, Hollmann is emphasizing the literal and figurative elevation of the ruling class, who always appear above the peasants. Penny closes out

¹¹⁶ Kotis and Hollmann, *Urinetown*, 16.

the song by threatening Old Man Strong with arrest since he has chosen to challenge the supremacy of the law. Despite her threat, the old man, in his desperation, decides to relieve himself in public, immediately conjuring the police. Lockstock and his sidekick police partner Barrel arrive and arrest Old Man Strong, who cries out for his son Bobby to never forget him and tell his mother he loves her. It is clear to all that he will not be seen again. Officer Lockstock sings a short reprise of Pennywise's quasi-operatic interlude, urging Bobby not to follow in his father's footsteps.

The police presence in *Urinetown* is expanded upon early on in the musical. In a song called simply "The Cop Song," Lockstock, Barrel, and a chorus of other police officers sing about their role in society and sending people off to Urinetown. In the set up for the song, Lockstock and Barrel are chatting about the events of the day, where Old Man Strong (the hero Bobby's father) was sent to Urinetown. Officer Barrel, whom Kotis describes as "giddily bloodthirsty," asks Lockstock if he heard Strong scream on the way to Urinetown.¹¹⁷ Lockstock replies, "They all seem to scream in the end, now, don't they? As their long journey into "exile" comes to a close . . . They do scream then, Mister Barrel. They most certainly do."¹¹⁸ At this point both men laugh maniacally. The quotation marks on the word "exile" in the published script ensure that the performer will suggest there is some ambiguity and inuendo with regard to Urinetown. As the audience will come to learn later in the show, the fate of those "sent to Urinetown" is actually execution by being thrown off the top of a building, but at this point, that detail is not fully known. Either way, the uproarious laughter of the police officers at the idea of arrest, imprisonment, or what is in actuality execution, is unsettling.

¹¹⁷ Kotis and Hollman, *Urinetown*, xxi.

¹¹⁸ Kotis and Hollman, *Urinetown*, 28.

As the scene continues a vamp begins for “The Cop Song.” The song serves to establish the point of view of the police officers and their attitude toward those who break the law. In particular, the song and its choreography serve to emphasize the brutal violence the police afflict against the people they arrest. As the song first begins, Lockstock explains what the “journey” to Urinetown is like, describing in gruesome ways including “worthy of a gurney,” and “slapped face, smacked with a mace, certain to debase.”¹¹⁹ Lockstock’s vocal delivery is gruff and he almost barks these lyrics in an intimidating tone. As he sings, Barrel, clearly his protégé, mimics his choreography as if learning from him. Next, the men begin a series of verses, as Lockstock and Barrel recount various cases of people they have caught and arrested in the past. The melody, rhythm, and textual structure for these verses resemble a children’s rhyme game: “Julie Cassidy / Went to a field behind a tree / Saw there was no one who could see”¹²⁰ (see Figure 12). To accompany these lyrics, composer Mark Hollmann chooses the *Dies irae* chant melody from the Latin requiem liturgy, chronicling the “day of wrath” and judgement at the end of days (Figure 13). This melodic motif has been so overused as to become cliché, which makes it all the more perfect for this absurd parody of a children’s game about police arrest.

¹¹⁹ Kotis and Hollmann, *Urinetown*, 29.

¹²⁰ Kotis and Hollmann, *Urinetown*, 29.

Figure 12: “Cop Song” excerpt

Lockstock/Barrel:
Ju - lie Cas - si - dy went to a field be - hind a tree,
Barrel:
saw there was no one who could see her pee. But me!

Figure 13: *Dies irae* chant melody

Seq. 1.
D I-es írae, dí-es ílla,
Di - es i - rae

John Carrafa’s choreography further magnifies the absurd juxtaposition. As the refrain about Julie Cassidy begins, Lockstock and Barrel delicately prance downstage left. As they sing the third of the three lines (“Saw there was no one who could see”) they draw their police batons. At this point, Lockstock delivers the punchline by finishing the line and shouting “HER PEE,” to which Barrel cries back, “BUT ME!” Following this line, both officers yell “BANG” in unison while violently striking the air with their batons. This interjection is not in the published script and seems to be an addition by Carrafa. In the archival video recording of this number from the Broadway production of *Urinetown*, the audience can be heard laughing at this moment. As with *The Producers*, this approach for number—and indeed the entirety of *Urinetown*—is to couple serious subject matter with comedy and entertainment. While audiences may not find police

brutality comical, the fact that the crime in this case is urination makes the scene completely ridiculous.

As the song continues, more cops enter the stage. The lighting for the number keeps the periphery of the stage quite dark, with only the main playing area illuminated. As the cops enter from the box area, they can be seen only by the flashlights they wield, moving them around in various directions. As they descend to the stage using the stairs on either side, they shine their flashlights directly toward the audience as they get into their positions, as if reminding the audience that they, too, are under scrutiny and surveillance. When the full ensemble of eight police officers, both men and women, begin to dance together, footlights at the edge of the stage cast huge silhouette shadows on the upstage wall appearing as looming phantom police doing the same choreography. The police make a line across the stage, and Carrafa's choreography creates "police versions" of standard Broadway choreography. For example, at one point, the officers walk stage left to stage right in a line, swinging their arms as they look out to the audience, reminiscent of vaudeville, but simultaneously evoking choreographed military exercises of authoritarian regimes. Later, the ensemble does a kind of kick line, skipping in place, but the effect looks like they are marching. With the addition of more police, the celebrations after each verse become more and more raucous. At one point, a female officer leaps onto the back of a fellow officer, who spins her around as she twirls her baton in the air and screams. Other cops dance gleefully face-to-face in close proximity as they jab each other, amping each other up.

About two-thirds of the way through the number, there is a dramatic change to its look and feel, setting up the final build to the end. After several verses that have grown in intensity, naming more "criminals" who have been caught and rounded up, a drum roll brings the action to a screeching halt, over top of which Lockstock yells, "So if peace is what you're after /

Urinetown's the rafter to hang it on."¹²¹ Lockstock has essentially conveyed in stark terms the bipartisan "tough-on-crime" rhetoric of the Clinton administration over the last decade: if you want to lower the crime rate, you need to increase police and incarceration. The audience is caught short, having been enjoying what is otherwise an energetic and joyful musical number, but realizing that the joy of the police comes from violence against the public.

After Lockstock's exclamation, the lights drop quickly to a complete blackout, leaving only the police flashlights visible. The music grinds to a halt and resumes at a slower tempo with only staccato punctuations on the downbeat. The voices of individual cops, one at a time, can be heard singing the *Dies irae* motif to the names of the "criminals" mentioned previously in the song (see Figure 14). After each name is sung, a ratchet in the orchestra signals the police to shine their flashlights sharply in the same direction. After the first two names, the cops start layering their entrances over top of one another creating an overlapping chorus as they shine their flashlights around the room in different directions, mostly directly out at the audience. Gradually, the tempo accelerates and the cops begin chanting "don't be like them" over and over as they shine their flashlights directly upward to illuminate their own faces in the darkness. Lockstock begins a recapitulation of the beginning of the song, describing the "journey" to Urinetown. The other cops gradually join him and the lights come back up onstage. As they reach the final word of the song ("Urinetown"), they charge downstage in unison to strike their final pose: broad gestures of intimidation aimed directly out at the audience, batons in the air, ready to strike.

¹²¹ Kotis and Hollmann, *Urinetown*, 31.

Figure 14: “Cop Song” *Dies irae* canon

Ja - cob Ro - sen - bloom! ___ Don't be like them, don't be like

Ro - ger Roo - se - velt! Jo - seph "Old Man" Strong! Don't be like

Ju - lie Cas - si - dy! ___

Government vs. The People

The sinister contempt for the masses and zeal for punishment extends beyond the police force to those who make the law. The corrupt businessman Caldwell B. Cladwell rules with an iron fist, keeping the people in check by keeping them in poverty, all while profiting from the fees he charges them to use the public amenities. When Hope begins to realize her father may not be the admirable leader she thought and tries to question him, he explains his philosophy in a song called “Don’t Be the Bunny.” Over the course of several verses, Cladwell uses the metaphor of an “innocent” bunny to make a point about criminals and those he considers to be freeloaders:

Cladwell:

A little bunny at a toll booth.
 He needs a measly fifty cents.
 Our little bunny didn’t plan ahead.
 Poor bunny simply doesn’t have the bread!
 He begs for mercy, but gets jail instead.
 Hassenpfeffer’s in the air
 As the bunny gets the chair!¹²²

¹²² Kotis and Hollmann, *Urinetown*, 47.

In this stanza, Cladwell implies that those who cannot afford to pay municipal fees should be jailed and—even more extreme—executed. This exaggerated attitude criminalizing poverty nevertheless reflects the tenor of American political rhetoric regarding welfare and other social aid programs during the 1980s and 90s. While President Ronald Reagan frequently told exaggerated stories of so-called “welfare queens” during his campaign and administration, it was President Bill Clinton who signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996, passed by a Republican-controlled congress, that put limits on public programs like welfare, food stamps, and housing aid. But *Urinetown* uses comedy to achieve its political commentary—Cladwell is singing about putting a bunny in an electric chair, not a human.

In *Urinetown*, the younger generation represent the hope for the future and the group leading the charge to speak truth to power. To make matters glaringly, comically obvious, the leading romantic couple are named Bobby Strong and Hope Cladwell. In the scene where the two first meet, the audience comes to understand a bit about their politics:

Hope: Oh, I’m not afraid of people, Officers.

Lockstock: Oh, no?

Hope: Not really. Everyone has a heart, you see. As long as you know that you need never fear a soul.

Lockstock: Everyone?

Hope: Everyone.

Barrel: Even criminals?

Hope: Even criminals.

Bobby: Even policemen?¹²³

This brief interplay perfectly encapsulates the satirical attitudes of the characters and the show as a whole. Hope expresses a magnanimous sympathy and compassion for all, including those with criminal records. Meanwhile, the cops suggest criminals are incorrigible, while Bobby quips that

¹²³ Kotis and Hollmann, *Urinetown*, 33.

it is the police who are, in fact, heartless. In a few seconds, playwright Greg Kotis captures the full spectrum of political tensions of the late 1990s over rising numbers of police, arrests, and incarceration.

After the police exit, these views are expanded even further:

Hope: You were rather brave with them.

Bobby: I don't care for policemen. Not those two, anyway.

Hope: Policemen protect the peace.

Bobby: Do they?

Hope: Usually.¹²⁴

This exchange between Bobby and Hope represents the beginning of Hope's awakening as her naïve views of the world begin to crack and fall away. Hope represents a member of the establishment—literally part of the family—who is blindly following the law without questioning it. Up to this point, she genuinely believes that police keep the peace and the laws governing the public amenities are for the best. The fact that these laws and policies generally never affect her represent the key disparity outlined in Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*: that wealth and (racial) privilege are the key determinant of whether you will engage with the criminal justice system.

Bobby Strong, on the other hand, begins questioning the law as soon as his father is arrested. When Hope tells him to “follow his heart” in their comedic love duet, he listens. The next day, when he arrives at work at the amenity, he catches the tail end of a comical government announcement that “UCG awards Amenity Number Nine the first our new and entirely legal fee hikes, which we hope you all will honor and enjoy.”¹²⁵ The poor protest, but it is no use. When

¹²⁴ Kotis and Hollmann, *Urinetown*, 34.

¹²⁵ Kotis and Hollmann, *Urinetown*, 39.

Bobby tells Pennywise he has been thinking about what happened to his father, she retorts, “He broke the law yesterday, Bobby, and that’s the end of it,” to which Bobby implores, “But what if the law is wrong?”¹²⁶ Bobby then launches into a rousing, heroic number called “Look at the Sky,” which is comically vague and lacking in clear metaphor, but nevertheless serves to communicate his point and inspire the masses. In the song, Bobby rails against the establishment exploiting the poor who are made to follow orders: “We keep filling moneybags with broken lives and dreams, but what’s it for? I can’t ignore these black, immoral profit-making schemes.”¹²⁷ Like Javert before her, Penelope Pennywise cannot bring herself to question the law, saying, “The fee is the law, Bobby Strong.” But Bobby defiantly pushes back with an overwrought declaration, sold for comic effect: “And what if there was a new law in town, Ms. Pennywise? A new law that didn’t come from any voting process or elected body or process of judicial review, but a brand-new law that came from an organ. That’s right, a muscular, blood-pumping organ. (*He thumps his chest.*) Like this one. Right here.”¹²⁸ By the end of Act I, Bobby is leading an uprising of citizens against the political elite, and has kidnapped Cladwell’s daughter Hope and taken her hostage as a bargaining chip. Fed up with a corrupt government that passes laws making it easier to arrest and incarcerate its citizens, Bobby and the rest of the poor were reflecting popular sentiments in the United States at the end of the twentieth century.

¹²⁶ Kotis and Hollmann, *Urinetown*, 40.

¹²⁷ Kotis and Hollmann, *Urinetown*, 41.

¹²⁸ Kotis and Hollmann, *Urinetown*, 42.

“What Is Urinetown?”

Act II of *Urinetown* digs more deeply into the metaphor and message of the musical. Once again dispensing with subtlety, the opening number of the second act is a raucous klezmer number quite literally titled “What is Urinetown?”¹²⁹ In it, the various constituencies sing stanzas that express their interpretation of Urinetown and its function. First, the poor offer their literal understanding of Urinetown as an execution method:

Little Becky Two Shoes:

What is Urinetown?
Urinetown’s the end!
Swift and brutal punishment—
No need now to pretend!

Hot Blades Harry:

The trapdoor’s sprung and then you’re hung,
And when they cut you down,
They’ll box you up and ship you out
And call it Urinetown!¹³⁰

Next, the scene transitions to Cladwell deploying the police to find his daughter and punish Bobby Strong. Giving his orders to Lockstock, Cladwell shouts, “You’ve got weapons! Use them!”¹³¹ When Lockstock protests, Cladwell launches into song:

¹²⁹ It is worth pointing out that both *The Producers* and *Urinetown* include klezmer-style numbers. While Max’s character being Jewish (not to mention Mel Brooks) gives some explanation for the choice, it is less clear in this instance. Yet both musicals are doing a parody of a standard Broadway convention of using Jewish music. For more, see Andrea Most, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

¹³⁰ Kotis and Hollmann, *Urinetown*, 62. The archaic punishment of hanging also evokes Leo Frank’s lynching in *Parade*.

¹³¹ Kotis and Hollmann, *Urinetown*, 63.

Cladwell:

What is Urinetown?
Urinetown's a tool,
An instrument of power
To enforce my iron rule!
So send your troops to all the stoops
And let them understand,
If Hope is not returned,
It's Urinetown for all the land!¹³²

Here, Cladwell spells out his use of police force to maintain his grip on power, but by using the word “troops,” he also invokes the authoritarian idea of military action against his citizens to enforce his “iron rule.”

After Cladwell, the scene cuts to Bobby and his mother Josephine, who are clandestinely sneaking around the city to spread word of their uprising to other amenity custodians. Bobby's stanza is an articulation of the message he is trying to spread:

Bobby:

What is Urinetown?
Urinetown's a lie,
A means to keep the poor in check
Until the day they die!
I did not shirk their dirty work,
But things are different now.
We'll fight for right with all our might
Until we win somehow!¹³³

Bobby is admitting he was initially complicit in the unjust system, even working for them as an assistant custodian, but he has since come to his senses.

¹³² Kotis and Hollmann, *Urinetown*, 63.

¹³³ Kotis and Hollmann, *Urinetown*, 64.

Still, the final, most chilling stanza comes from Little Sally. Speaking with Officer Lockstock, she tells him, “The way I see it, I’m already in Urinetown. We all are. Even you. . . . Urinetown isn’t so much a place as it is a metaphysical place.” During her verse, the frenzied klezmer comes to a screeching halt. Little Sally sings mostly a cappella, with her vocal statements punctuated by hits from the orchestra. Spencer Kayden’s cartoonish, childlike voice makes the severity of her words all the more chilling.

Little Sally:

What is Urinetown?
Urinetown is here!
It’s the town wherever
People learn to live in fear.
So look around, you’ve fin’lly found
The place you asked about,
For Urinetown is your town
If you’re hopeless, down-and-out!¹³⁴

The ensemble repeats Little Sally’s last couplet, which is echoed a final time in dramatic fashion by Officer Lockstock. This final stanza most clearly employs the Brechtian influence of the piece, singing directly to the audience. Little Sally, the ensemble, and the police narrator Officer Lockstock are telling the audience, in not-so-subtle terms, that they—the audience—live in Urinetown, too. It is a blatant reminder that this musical, while set in a dystopian future, is really a satire critiquing the present.

Urinetown does not have a conventional happy ending. Bobby becomes a martyr for the cause, meeting the same fate as his father by being “sent to Urinetown” (“Wait a minute, you’re just going to throw me off this roof and that’s supposed to be Urinetown?! Death is

¹³⁴ Kotis and Hollmann, *Urinetown*, 65.

Urinetown?!”).¹³⁵ Hope exacts revenge by (literally) overthrowing her father and “sending him to Urinetown” as well (“I regret nothing! You hear me? Nothing!! Maybe I was a bad father and a cruel and vicious man! But I kept the pee off the street and the water in the ground!”).¹³⁶ Hope takes over the government and liberates the people, allowing them to pee freely: “My father was a tyrant. We need never fear him again. Justice is the only tyrant we need obey.”¹³⁷ She leads the ensemble in a rousing hymn packed with irony and double-entendre called “I See a River.”¹³⁸ The hymn is a send up of many other hymn-like tunes from musicals dating back to the 1940s and 50s (*Carousel*’s “You’ll Never Walk Alone” or “Follow the Fold” from *Guys and Dolls*) or more recently in *Parade* (“There is a Fountain Filled with Blood”). At the same time, the conflation of religion and misguided politics also serves as yet another social critique, a parody of the religious fervor underpinning American politics in the late twentieth century.

When *Urinetown* was developed in the late 1990s, it was responding to its political moment: decades of “tough-on-crime” political rhetoric and historic crime bills that had led to an increased police presence, harsher sentences, and skyrocketing incarceration rates. The musical was also a critique of corporate greed and a warning about the threat of ecological devastation in the wake of global climate change. But what Kotis and Hollmann could never have known when writing the musical was the impact the 9/11 terrorist attacks would have on all of these topics.

The USA PATRIOT Act allowed the government to surveil its own citizens as if they were

¹³⁵ Kotis and Hollmann, *Urinetown*, 85.

¹³⁶ Kotis and Hollmann, *Urinetown*, 97.

¹³⁷ Kotis and Hollmann, *Urinetown*, 98.

¹³⁸ Mark Hollman worked as a Lutheran church organist and specifically mentions wanting to emulate a Christian church hymn with “I See a River” (see Kotis and Hollmann, *Urinetown*, xxi).

foreign adversaries. It allowed for the indefinite detention of immigrants suspected of any association with terrorism. The mystery of *Urinetown* perfectly mirrored the secrecy shrouding the Guantanamo Bay Detention Center in Cuba, as military officials were evading questions and reporters were being kept from documenting what was taking place there. Thousands of American soldiers were deployed to wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. For audiences watching a story of police surveillance, violent and indefinite detention, and government secrecy, these parallels would only continue to become more salient as *Urinetown* continued running on Broadway into 2004.

Conclusion

During the final, grim moments of *Urinetown*, when we learn that Hope's policies of freedom have actually led to even more ecological devastation and drought (and Hope's own murder at the hands of her citizens), Little Sally says to Officer Lockstock, "I don't think too many people are going to come see this musical."¹³⁹ The reality, of course, is that *Urinetown* had consistently drawn audiences from its first presentation at the New York Fringe Festival to its off-Broadway run earlier in 2001 at the American Theater of Actors. The show ran for 965 performances and might have run for more if it was not forced out of the dilapidated Henry Miller Theater by developers constructing a 57-story skyscraper.¹⁴⁰ The producers had specifically been drawn to the Henry Miller Theater because it was run-down and slated for renovation, leaving the plywood facing on the façade throughout the run of the show to add to the dystopian ambience. In fact, *Urinetown* was the longest-running show in the theater's history.

¹³⁹ Kotis, *Urinetown*, 100.

¹⁴⁰ Bruce Weber, "A Theater Closing, A Hit Show in the Cold," *New York Times*, October 29, 2003.

Ticket sales were going strong and its producers had projected it could run for at least another year. The show had just recently recouped its initial \$3.7 million investment and had launched an American tour. Still, with no other theaters immediately available and the complications of moving the production, the show was forced to close on January 4, 2004.

The Producers continued setting records, not only at box office, but at the Tony Awards. The musical was nominated for a record-breaking fifteen awards and won twelve, also a record, including winning in every single category for which it was nominated (the Best Actor and Best Featured Actor categories had multiple nominations).¹⁴¹ A studio film adaptation of the stage musical was released in 2005 with Lane and Broderick reprising their roles, even as the Broadway musical was still running in New York. *The Producers* closed in April 2007, almost exactly six years after opening, having given 2,502 performances. It was reported that Brooks, Meehan, and Stroman would open their next musical adaptation of Brooks's *Young Frankenstein* that November.¹⁴²

Considered together, *The Producers* and *Urinetown* set a new precedent for biting, satirical musicals that commented on American politics in a humorous way, rather than attempting to tackle the issues head on. According to John Bush Jones, these musicals succeeded where previous “serious” musicals of the 1990s had failed because they proved that “a socially conscious musical need not be solemn but can be preposterously, even absurdly hilarious; and that this kind of playful, entertaining socially meaningful musical can be a hit.”¹⁴³ They also used

¹⁴¹ While *The Producers* still holds the record for most Tony awards won by a single musical, its nominations record was broken by *Hamilton* with sixteen nominations in 2016.

¹⁴² Campbell Robertson, “Springtime for Hit’s End: *The Producers* to Close,” *New York Times*, February 23, 2007.

¹⁴³ Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves*, 356.

escapism to appeal to audiences who were disillusioned with the state of American politics, allowing them to laugh at what many considered to be a sad state of affairs. As Nathan Hurwitz writes, the issues raised in the musical resonated with audiences, especially in the immediate aftermath of September 11, “[lighting] a candle in the dark night, letting New Yorkers know that it was okay to laugh again.”¹⁴⁴ These shows kicked off a trend of self-referential, nostalgic musicals on Broadway. A few years after their debut, both were included in an article by *Times* reporter Robert Simonson sarcastically titled “Broadway Gives Its Regards to Itself,” noting how Broadway had “begun to resemble a hall of mirrors, with new musicals slyly quoting their elders and (sometimes) betters with campy abandon.”¹⁴⁵ As a result, these new musicals capitalized on American audiences’ nostalgia for a bygone era, whether it was classic days of Broadway, an era of less corrupt and divisive politics, or an America before the irreversible changes of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

¹⁴⁴ Hurwitz, *A History of the American Musical Theater*, 237.

¹⁴⁵ Robert Simonson, “Broadway Gives Its Regards to Itself,” *New York Times*, January 11, 2004.

Afterword

The focus of this dissertation is necessarily limited in scope, as I have chosen to consider depictions of incarceration in musicals from the 1980s and 1990s. This is not to say that it is an exhaustive or comprehensive study. On the contrary, it includes some intentional boundaries and conscious omissions, gaps that will need to be filled in the years to come, either by me or by other scholars. First and most obviously, the temporal scope of this study is confined to roughly the last two decades of the twentieth century (with an extension to 2001), focusing on the exponential growth of incarceration rates from the Reagan administration through the Clinton years. Though *The Producers* and *Urinetown* debuted on Broadway in 2001 during the George W. Bush presidency, I have framed them as being formulated during and responding to the political ramifications of the twenty years prior.

In addition to these temporal boundaries, the narrow focus of this study has also left some areas still to be explored when considering the overall picture of incarceration on Broadway at the end of the twentieth century. The first area is that of race, as I have looked only at musicals that depict incarcerated characters who, for all intents and purposes, are considered white. The second area is gender, since the present study looks exclusively at male characters and omits discussions of women behind bars. Finally, this study does not consider revival presentations of musicals written before the 1980s—even those that may have resonated with the cultural moment—focusing instead on how the contemporary politics influenced the development of *new* musical works. This afterword expounds on these topics and gives a brief overview of how the theme of crime and incarceration has continued to appear in Broadway musicals to the present day.

Race

As has been discussed in the previous chapters, the “whiteness” of the male protagonists in these six musicals is, at times, broadly construed. Technically, the Joseph of the Bible would have been Middle Eastern, Molina is Latino, and Leo Frank was Jewish at a time when—as the musical shows—Jews were racial and religious “others.” But despite these technicalities, these productions needed all of these men to read as white in order to make their political points, especially if the goal was to elicit sympathy from white audiences. Joseph is unfailingly played by a white actor in every subsequent production of *Joseph*. The original casting of Brent Carver as Molina might have allowed audiences forget the play was set in South America altogether, were it not for the Latin rhythms in the score and Chita Rivera as the Spider Woman.¹ And by the 1990s, while anti-Semitism was by no means eradicated in the United States, the idea that Jews would not be considered white in America would be fringe.

Along with the incarcerated white men in *Les Misérables*, *The Producers*, and *Urinetown*, these characters allowed audiences, who were also overwhelmingly white, to empathize with the incarcerated, who were disproportionately nonwhite in the “real world.”² As shown in Chapter 2, when audiences were faced with harsh and brutal realities of bigotry like homophobia and xenophobia, the discomfort tested the limits of their empathy. The whiteness of the incarcerated characters added another degree of separation from the political issue—like faith in 1980s or comedy in 2001. Removing the racial element allowed these musicals to reference

¹ James Leve makes this argument in *Kander and Ebb* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 154.

² The cast of *Urinetown* included only one nonwhite actor, Lawrence E. Street, who was in the ensemble. The rest of the entire company was white.

the mass incarceration epidemic obliquely rather than head-on, while still giving liberal white audiences the satisfaction of taking in a musical that spoke to current events.

This is not to say that there have been no depictions of Black people at odds with the law during this period or since. One prominent example is *Ragtime* (1998), with music by Stephen Flaherty and lyrics by Lynn Ahrens. At the end of Act I, Sarah, a young Black woman and new mother, is beaten to death by Secret Service officers at a political campaign rally when someone mistakenly accuses her of having a gun. The act ends at her funeral, as Black mourners demand an end to injustice and pray for equality. At the end of Act II, Coalhouse Walker, a Black man and Sarah's beloved who has been seeking justice for her murder, is shot dead by police. The musical (which also dealt with Jewish immigration at the turn of the century) was lumped in with *Parade* by critics as being too "serious," not to mention expensive to produce, but ran for two years. When it was revived on Broadway in 2009, it ran for only two months. At the time of this writing, New York City Center Encores! is presenting a two-weekend production of *Ragtime* (October–November 2024). It remains to be seen if this production, like the Encores! presentation of *Parade* in 2022, is destined for a full-fledged Broadway revival production.

Another example of a musical critiquing the mistreatment of Black Americans by the criminal justice system came a bit later into the new millennium, when Kander and Ebb returned to the theme of prison yet again for *The Scottsboro Boys* (2010). Directed by Susan Stroman (of *The Producers*), the musical uses the framework of a minstrel show to tell the true story of a group of Black boys who were wrongfully convicted of raping a white woman on a train in 1931. The entire cast is Black except for the Interlocutor, who is white. The accused men spend most of the musical incarcerated awaiting their various trials, verdicts, sentences, and appeals. In the dramatic conclusion of the piece, the men come onstage in minstrel attire and blackface. When

the Interlocutor calls for a cakewalk, the men refuse, wipe off their blackface makeup, and leave the stage. The musical initially ran for two months off-Broadway (including previews) and transferred to Broadway later that year, again running for only two months. It should be noted that both *Ragtime* and *The Scottsboro Boys* were written and directed by white creative teams.

Gender

In the introduction to the tenth anniversary edition of *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander has a section defending why her original study (published in 2010) focused so intently on the experience of Black men and largely overlooked women in the prison system. She explains that Black men were simply disproportionately affected by the Drug War and mass incarceration epidemic, with one in three Black men having a felony record in 2010.³ Still, Alexander acknowledges that “Although men continue to comprise 90 percent of the prison population, women’s incarceration has increased 800 percent over the past thirty years, and the incarceration rate for black women is double that of white women.”⁴ Even for those who are not swept up in the criminal justice system themselves, they are deeply impacted by the loss of the men in their lives who are.

Imprisoned women were depicted on Broadway at the end of the twentieth century as well. While one could point to broader examples of confinement like Rapunzel locked in her tower in *Into the Woods* (1987), Christine held hostage by the Phantom in *Phantom of the Opera* (1988), or Belle trapped in the Beast’s castle in *Beauty and the Beast* (1994), several more literal

³ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, tenth anniversary edition (New York: New Press, 2020), xxi.

⁴ Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, xxi.

examples do exist. Frank Wildhorn's 1998 musical adaptation of Orczy's *The Scarlet Pimpernel* tells the story of Sir Percy Blakeney, a vigilante who saves people from the guillotine during the French Revolution. In Act II, his wife Marguerite and her brother Armand are thrown into prison before being rescued by the League. Michael John LaChiusa's *Marie Christine* (1999), based on Euripides's *Medea*, is bookended by scenes of a young mixed-race woman in prison. The other inmates ask her to tell the story of her mother, Marie Christine, a Black woman who practiced voodoo and murdered her children as revenge against a man who left her. Finally, in *Hairspray* (2002), mentioned by Susan Stroman during her interview with Michael Kantor as an example of "movicals" (like *The Producers*) that address social issues through lighthearted comedy, a group of protestors march on the local Baltimore television station to protest its segregationist policies. When the police are called, white and Black women are arrested and put in jail together. Act II opens with the jazzy prison dance number "Big Doll House."

Revivals

The comedy of a prison dance number like "Big Doll House" in *Hairspray* works because of its reference to an even more iconic work, one that bridges the second and third gaps in the present study—women and revivals. The original production of Kander and Ebb's musical *Chicago* opened on Broadway in 1975. The vaudeville-style musical is largely set in a women's prison and follows the story of women on death row who have murdered their lovers. In "Cell Block Tango," six incarcerated women sing and dance in sexy attire while explaining how and why they killed their husbands. Chita Rivera starred in the original production as Velma Kelly, one of the "six merry murderesses." The piece is an exploration of the allure of celebrity in American culture, the sensationalism of the news media, and a corrupt criminal justice system. It

is no wonder, then, that New York City Center Encores! would produce a star-studded concert performance of the show in May of 1996. Ethan Mordden has connected the impetus and success of this production to the O. J. Simpson trial that gripped the nation in 1995.⁵ Ben Brantley also explicitly drew this connection in his review of the full revival that transferred from Encores! to Broadway in November of that year.⁶ The original production of *Chicago* ran for about two years between 1975 and 1977. The revival, which is still running on Broadway today, withstanding even the financial turmoil of the Covid-19 shutdown, now holds the records for the longest-running revival and the longest-running American musical in Broadway history.⁷ That this show has become such a lasting fixture on Broadway over the last nearly thirty years speaks to the larger thesis of this dissertation, that crime and incarceration are fixtures of the Broadway genre, especially since the 1980s.

Incarceration on Broadway Since 2001

In the last twenty years, musicals depicting crime, policing, and incarceration seem to have become more and more common. Indeed, the musicals covered in depth in the chapters of this dissertation have created models and references that ensure the success of subsequent works. Procedural crime drama on television and crime-based movie plots have also continued to flourish, and many of the musicals produced in the twenty-first century have been adaptations of popular films. Broadway producers have learned what sells and continue to offer it to audiences.

⁵ Ethan Mordden, *All That Jazz: The Life and Times of the Musical Chicago* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁶ Ben Brantley, "A Lively Legacy, A Come-Hither Air," *New York Times*, November 15, 1996.

⁷ The *Chicago* revival is the second-longest running musical in Broadway history, after *The Phantom of the Opera*, which is a British musical by Andrew Lloyd Webber.

The examples are so plentiful that new categories begin to emerge when considering them as a whole.

In the early twenty-first century, *The Producers* and *Urinetown* both looked back nostalgically at earlier models of the form, each in their own way, but they were not alone. Several other musicals drew inspiration from the even earlier musical comedies of the 1920s. As those musicals were originally products of the Prohibition Era set in their modern day, they often included plotlines containing gangsters, bootleggers, speakeasys, police raids, and resulting jail time. In *Thoroughly Modern Millie* (2002), the romantic lead Jimmy discovers he is in love with Millie and sings “What Do I Need with Love?” from a jail cell after being arrested during a speakeasy raid. And while not containing a prison scene, *The Drowsy Chaperone* (2006) does feature two gangsters who attempt to crash the wedding of a leading follies girl who is retiring from a show their mob boss has financially invested in. Following the wedding trope, *Nice Work if You Can Get It* (2012) creates a new prohibition-era plot with the songs of George Gershwin, the climax of which involves a wedding being interrupted by the arrest of under-cover bootleggers. Scholars have pointed to Prohibition as the genesis for the American penal state and a model for the War on Drugs.⁸ Thus, the 1920s pastiche musicals of the early 2000s including the same references to substance crime can be seen as a further critique of the contemporary mass incarceration epidemic.

In addition to adult men and women in prison, some new musicals have addressed juvenile detention as well. *Newsies* (2012), a stage version of the live-action Disney film from 1992, recounts the horrors of juvenile detention in turn-of-the-century New York City. The lead

⁸ See Lisa McGirr, *The War on Alcohol: Prohibition and the Rise of the American State* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2016).

newsboy Jack Kelly makes drawings of the abuse he suffered at the Refuge, which he prints in his own newspaper used to spread word of the newsies' labor cause. When a copy reaches Governor Theodore Roosevelt, he leans on the paper executives to meet the newsies demands and shuts down the Refuge. In Roald Dahl's *Matilda* (2013), another 1990s movie-turned-musical, the wicked Miss Trunchbull punishes disobedient schoolchildren by locking them in the Chokey, a tiny cupboard lined with sharp objects. When Matilda uses her magical powers against Miss Trunchbull, the students sing the song "Revolting Children," cleverly referring both to Trunchbull's disdain for them and their rebellion against her.

In the 2010s, some musicals—all adapted from popular films—focused on undercover protagonists, either criminals on the run, or those who are hiding from criminals. In *Sister Act* (2011), based on the 1992 film starring Whoopi Goldberg, Deloris joins a convent and takes over the church choir as part of the witness protection program, after her gangster ex-boyfriend threatens to kill her. In *Catch Me If You Can* (2011), an adaptation of the 2002 film starring Leonardo DiCaprio, real-life con artist Frank Abagnale is arrested by FBI agents and sentenced to fifteen years in prison. The arrest bookends the musical, with most of the action taking place as a flashback. In the epilogue, he is released after only seven of his fifteen years in prison and gets hired by the FBI to track down other criminals like him. *Leap of Faith* (2012), a 1992 movie starring Steve Martin, tells the story of a con man posing as a traveling reverend who gets stuck in a small town in Kansas. There, his romantic involvement with the town's female sheriff forces him to come to terms with his life choices.

In the last ten years or so, original musicals featuring imprisonment have continued to earn high praise, taking home some of the industry's highest honors. *A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder* (2013), which won the Tony Award for Best Musical, opens in a jail cell,

where the leading man Monty is writing his memoirs on the eve of his possible execution. In addition to flashbacks telling his story, the musical includes several scenes in the jail, including Monty befriending the prison custodian and others where multiple different women confess to his crime in order to muddy the waters of his guilt and get him set free. *Hadestown* (2019), also a Best Musical, is a retelling of the Orpheus myth, where both Euridice and Persephone are imprisoned by Hades in the underworld. *Hadestown* draws on other political topics as the souls of the dead in the underworld are engaged in the perpetual work of “building a wall.”

Finally, many of the musicals discussed in this dissertation and this afterword depict incarceration as part of a story from American history. *Suffs* (2024), with music and lyrics by Shaina Taub, who also plays the lead role of suffragist Alice Paul, recounts the women’s suffrage movement and the path to the nineteenth amendment granting women the right to vote. As a part of this narrative, it also depicts the horrible prison conditions endured by the women who were arrested for protesting at the orders of President Wilson. This includes Alice Paul’s near death from starvation during her hunger strike and a threat to have declared insane and committed to an asylum if she does not eat. Letters from the incarcerated women describing their abuse are leaked to the press, forcing Wilson to release them. The musical won the Tony Awards for Best Book and Best Score.

The Show Goes On

As for the musicals covered in this dissertation, they continue to be reinterpreted for modern audiences. *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* is beginning another U.K. tour in December 2024 with Donny Osmond, who had previously played Joseph in numerous stage productions and the 1999 film version, in the role of Pharaoh. Producer Michael Harrison

said, “We are honored to have an icon of the show join us to create a magical moment for families this Christmas, who will cherish the experience for years to come.”⁹ An international “Arena Spectacular” tour of *Les Misérables* kicked off in September 2024 in Belfast, Ireland. Producer Cameron Mackintosh said, “With *Les Mis*’ 40th phenomenal year starting this October, there couldn’t be a better time for it to happen.”¹⁰ The tour is scheduled to visit at least fifteen countries with more venues to be announced.¹¹ The *Kiss of the Spider Woman* film adaptation starring Jennifer Lopez, now approximately the age Chita Rivera was in 1993, is listed by *Playbill* as being in the post-production phase and should be announcing a release date in the coming months.¹² A national tour of the *Parade* revival is currently running across the United States, with performances scheduled through September of 2025.¹³ A revival of *The Producers* is opening in December 2024 in London at the Meiner Chocolate Factory, a venue known as a tryout for West End and Broadway productions. Finally, New York City Center Encores! is presenting *Urinetown* in February 2025, just weeks after the Presidential Inauguration of the 47th President of the United States. The promotional language for the production states “*Urinetown* is . . . the classic story of a ragtag group of underdogs coming together against a corrupt power. In this Tony-winning musical, nothing is safe from criticism—capitalism, politics, the

⁹ Andrew Gans, “Donny Osmond to Return to *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*,” *Playbill*, February 21, 2024, <https://playbill.com/article/donny-osmond-to-return-to-joseph-and-the-amazing-technicolor-dreamcoat>.

¹⁰ Andrew Gans and Logan Culwell-Block, “*Les Misérables* Arena Tour, With Alfie Boe and Killian Donnelly as Valjean, Begins September 19,” *Playbill*, September 19, 2024. <https://playbill.com/article/les-miserables-arena-tour-with-alfie-boe-and-killian-donnelly-as-valjean-begins-september-19>.

¹¹ Alex Wood, “*Les Misérables* Arena Spectacular Announced,” *WhatsOnStage*, July 11, 2023, https://www.whatsonstage.com/news/les-miserables-arena-spectacular-announced_1510172/.

¹² David Gewirtzman, “Schedule of Upcoming Movie Musical Adaptations,” *Playbill*, October 28, 2024, <https://playbill.com/article/schedule-of-upcoming-movie-musical-adaptations-com-216487>.

¹³ “Tour – *Parade*,” *Parade Broadway* website, <https://paradebroadway.com/tour/>.

establishment, the anti-establishment, and even musical theater itself!”¹⁴ The appeal of musicals focused on crime and incarceration persists because those topics remain essential to the American experience.

In recent years, American incarceration has actually begun to trend downward, thanks to a groundswell of public engagement with the topic in response to the work of activists and scholars. As Michelle Alexander wrote in her 2020 introduction to *The New Jim Crow*, “Today, there is bipartisan support for some prison downsizing, and hundreds of millions of philanthropic dollars have begun to flow toward criminal justice reform.”¹⁵ American incarceration reached its peak in 2009 but has been on a general decline in the years since, down twenty-five percent by 2021.¹⁶ Nazgol Ghandnoosh notes that, “While notable, this pace of prison downsizing is insufficient in the face of the nearly 700% buildup in imprisonment since 1972. The prison population in 2021 was nearly six times as large as 50 years ago, before the era of mass incarceration. The prison and jail incarceration rate in the United States remains between five and eight times that of France, Canada, and Germany.”¹⁷ Michelle Alexander has also highlighted how despite declining crime rates, political rhetoric is still drawing from the “tough-on-crime” playbook with new targets. Donald Trump has run three presidential election campaigns demonizing immigrants, saying, “They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime.

¹⁴ “*Urinetown*,” New York City Center website, <https://www.nycitycenter.org/pdps/2024-2025/urinetown/>.

¹⁵ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, 2nd ed. (New York: New Press, 2020), xiii.

¹⁶ Nazgol Ghandnoosh, “One in Five: Ending Racial Inequity in Incarceration,” The Sentencing Project, October 11, 2023, <https://www.sentencingproject.org/reports/one-in-five-ending-racial-inequity-in-incarceration/>.

¹⁷ Ghandnoosh, “One in Five.”

They're rapists."¹⁸ In addition to the promise of mass deportations, Trump has promised to lock up his political opponents. He has even played music from *Les Misérables* at his rallies.¹⁹

Something about the connection between crime and incarceration and the Broadway musical remains fundamental to our understanding of what it means to be American.

In *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity*, Raymond Knapp describes musicals as a “distinctively American and widely influential art form,” one that is “connected in vital ways to [its] American constituency.”²⁰ He suggests that as a commercial industry, musicals have succeeded because they simply “provided what audiences wanted.”²¹ In *Our Musicals, Ourselves*, John Bush Jones writes, “As a form of popular entertainment for fairly broadbased audiences, throughout the twentieth century musicals variously dramatized, mirrored, or challenged our deeply-held cultural attitudes and beliefs.”²² Despite these and other socio-political approaches to the history of the Broadway musical, scholars have yet to draw the connection to one of America’s most enduring themes: incarceration.

This dissertation has sought to fill that gap by looking at Broadway musicals during the mass incarceration epidemic that began in the Reagan era and continued to surge into the new millennium, leading the United States to become the country with the highest incarceration rate

¹⁸ Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, xv.

¹⁹ Naomi Graber, “Do You Hear the People Sing?: Theater and Theatricality in the Trump Campaign,” *American Music* 35, no. 4 (2017): 435–45.

²⁰ Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 3–4.

²¹ Knapp, 4.

²² John Bush Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theatre* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2003).

in the world. In the 1980s, conservative religious politics fueled a racist War on Drugs. On Broadway, successful megamusicals with religious themes, such as *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* and *Les Misérables*, depicted incarcerated protagonists who were exonerated through their faith in God, catering to expanding audience bases that included tourists from outside New York. In the 1990s, the American media landscape was dominated by televised crime, both real and fictional, including a case against their own President. Society was also gripped by a moral panic regarding child sex abuse, which was connected to homophobia at a time when AIDS was devastating the gay community. Hoping to respond to this cultural moment, director Hal Prince brought new Broadway musicals like *Kiss of the Spiderwoman* and *Parade* where the incarcerated protagonist is wrongfully accused of sexually assaulting a minor, but these serious musicals proved too much for contemporary audiences to stomach. By the turn of the new millennium, Broadway audiences had become so disillusioned with the growing police state, mass incarceration, and political corruption, they were looking for comedy and satire that would allow them to laugh at their troubles. *The Producers* and *Urinetown* were able to successfully address these topics using humor and parody, even as they gained new resonance after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Considered together, these six productions reflect a broader trend of incarceration musicals on Broadway at the end of the twentieth century, a time when the topics of crime, policing, and incarceration were inescapable components of American media and political rhetoric.

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