

## Flash and Smoke: The Importance of Spectacle and Music in Theatre

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In "Poetics," Aristotle ranks the elements of theatre in the following order: plot (action), character, thought, diction (dialogue), song, and spectacle. Though these elements are essential to modern plays, the order of importance has changed in regard to modern musical theatre. In her lecture, "Musical Theatre: Fluff or Fury" (2005), Professor Brown Cardwell asserts that plot and structure are vital to an effective musical but that song and spectacle also carry a leading role in the vehicle of the show. Unlike straight plays, the characters of musical theatre tell their stories in two languages: dialogue and song because sometimes words are not enough to express emotions onstage. Here, song takes the place of words. The novelist Victor Hugo once stated, "Music expresses that which cannot be put into words and that which cannot remain silent." If music possesses an element that raises thought or emotion above words, then it logically follows that musicals are certainly not all flash and smoke. Musical transform society through their show tunes and spectacular effects and as a result have become an extremely popular form of theatre.

The Kander and Ebb musicals *Chicago* (1975) and *Cabaret* (1966) carefully allow song and spectacle to transform heavy issues of media exploitation and Nazi oppression into show stopping entertainment. On the surface, the jazzy atmosphere and sparkle of lights create an inviting place for the audience that draws them into the world of the play. Forgetting their own lives, they begin to live through the characters onstage. In these musicals, spectacle fulfills the purpose of disguising the sharp corners of issues that may turn the audience away in the beginning. In *Chicago*, Billy Flynn, a defense lawyer, relates the necessity of spectacle in theatre and reality in the song "Razzle Dazzle":

Give 'em the old razzle dazzle  
Razzle dazzle 'em  
Give 'em an act with lots of flash in it  
And the reaction will be passionate  
Give 'em the old hocus pocus  
Bread and feather 'em  
How can they see with sequins in their eyes?  
What if your hinges all are rusting?  
What if, in fact, you're just disgusting?  
Razzle dazzle 'em  
And they'll never catch wise! (Virgi)

Kander and Ebb's *Cabaret* also demonstrates the power of spectacle not only in the production but also in the political arena. The characters of the Kit Kat Klub mesmerize the audience with their songs, while around them the evils of oppression, injustice, and suffering grow stronger. The lyrics from the Emcee's song "Willkommen" say it all:

Willkommen! Bienvenue! Welcome!  
Leave your troubles outside.  
So life is disappointing, forget it!  
In here life is beautiful.  
The girls are beautiful.  
Even the orchestra is beautiful. (Virgi)

Both *Cabaret* and *Chicago* warn audiences that the spectacle is not mere entertainment because its main purpose is to demonstrate the dangers of "razzle dazzle" in the real world.

Aside from spectacle, the lyrics and music of show tunes hold within them the fabric of the play. After the audience leaves the theatre, they will not recall much of the dialogue, but they will hum the songs. Singing the lyrics or listening to a Broadway soundtrack allows a person to re-live the production and the message of the playwright. Show tunes also allow those who have no access to a musical production to still grasp the key themes through the music. "Do You Hear the People Sing?" from *Les Miserables* expresses the power of music as the lower class gathers to fight for their freedom from the French nobility:

Do you hear the people sing?  
Singing a song of angry men?  
It is the music of a people  
Who will not be slaves again!  
When the beating of your heart  
Echoes the beating of the drums  
There is a life about to start  
When tomorrow comes! (*Les Miserables* Soundtrack Lyrics)

The elements of music and spectacle allow musical theatre to explore issues and touch the lives of the audience through entertainment. Those who view musicals as fluff may not see the deeper meaning behind the shimmering glitter, show-stopping tunes, and curtain of happiness. Certainly in reviewing these techniques, song and spectacle can be just as valuable as good dialogue. As said in the lyrics of the musical *Fame* (1989), "Whether in theatre or music or dance, / They have to be given the chance to fly by the seat of their pants! / To develop their minds! To be nurtured like plants" (Virgi).

#### Works Cited

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