

“The World Should Not Forsake You”:
Young Queer People of Faith in Contemporary Musical Theatre

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By Lusie M. Cuskey
M.A., University of Oregon, 2016
B.F.A., Western Kentucky University, 2013

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Chair: Henry Bial

Jane Barnette

Mechele Leon

Peter Zazzali

Sherrie Tucker

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The dissertation committee for Lusie M. Cuskey certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

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Abstract

Queerness and faith are configured in the American public imaginary as both mutually exclusive and inextricably intertwined. It is no surprise, then, that as recent years have seen an increase in LGBTQ representation in commercial (and particularly musical) theatre, several of those representations have included religious LGBTQ characters or queer characters from religious backgrounds. More surprising is the relative lack of scholarly attention to the ways queer people of faith operate within those narratives. This dissertation moves towards filling that gap by examining the way musicals with queer characters of faith both enter into and reflect social discourse around the intersections of queerness and faith lived out by individuals who belong to both communities. To a degree, this dissertation is activist in nature, proposing that stories about queer people of faith and especially young queer people of faith can and should be told (that is, that such representation can have positive effects both for people within those demographics and the broader communities in which they participate), can and should be told in a way that is likely to be accessible to both queer and religious communities, and that the particularities of musicals' cultural position and reception habits make musicals particularly well suited to doing this work. This dissertation engages textual analysis through the lenses of theology, queer theories, and reception theories to explore both the potential of these musicals to inspire community dialogue and acceptance and the effects these works have on the people they represent, particularly young people seeking affirmation in their identities and tools with which to discuss their identities with people who are important to them.

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Introduction

When I was an undergraduate, it was unusual for a cabaret, student showcase, or musical theatre workshop course to pass without a musical theatre student singing a song about the difficulties of loving both God and the romantic object of their affection. I attended a BFA program in the Bible Belt, and our musical theatre students regularly cycled through *bare: a pop opera*, *A Man of No Importance*, and *Falsettos* every few semesters as new classes of students moved into the musical theatre performance courses and started looking for works that aligned with their lived experiences. I have fond memories of that time and those musicals, of everyone trading cast recordings and YouTube videos of the best and worst performances we could find, of the various cabaret performances and student-directed showcases including their songs, but I also have questions: What makes one musical's interrogation of queerness and faith resonate while another's falls flat? Why did a group of eighteen, nineteen, and twentysomethings relate so deeply to those particular musicals, and why was that particular intersectional identity one we were so frequently drawn to perform? Why did our institutional conversations around that work center so much around the queerness of those musicals and so little around the faith? In this dissertation, I examine musicals featuring adolescent and emergent adult queer characters of faith to demonstrate that these works hold a significance far outside one Kentucky college town: they capture historically and socially specific snapshots of some of the most intimate, essential, and contested elements of the identities of queer people of faith that carry implications for the ability of faith communities and LGBTQ communities to coexist, helping some of their youngest and most vulnerable members to make peace with their identities in the process.

In his introduction to *Religion, Theatre, and Performance*, Lance Gharavi argues that a study of "theatre or performance studies that does not take religion and spirituality into account

is an incomplete one.”¹ Gharavi writes, in part, in response to Stanley Fish’s assertion that religion was set to “succeed high theory and the triumvirate of race, gender, and class as the center of intellectual energy in the academy” in a post-9/11 world newly concerned with the effects of religion on public discourse.² While Fish’s prediction has not fully come to pass, the period between 9/11 and the present moment has certainly seen a rise in the involvement of religion in the political landscape.

That period has also seen rapid changes in the legal and social acceptance of members of the LGBTQ community. A growing interest in the identities of people with minority gender identities and sexual orientations has led to increased cultural literacy as queerness has gained media visibility. This trend towards commercially viable queerness is particularly notable in the past five years of commercial musical theatre, with *Fun Home* (the first major musical with a butch lesbian protagonist) winning the Tony Award for Best Musical in 2015, a high-profile revival of landmark gay musical *Falsettos* in 2016, and a steady stream of LGBTQ-inclusive musicals on the Great White Way ever since. Three of the pieces in this dissertation – *Head Over Heels*, *The Prom*, and *Choir Boy* – had Broadway premiers or revivals in the 2018-2019 season alone, indicating that interest in queer stories (and stories coupling queerness and faith) is only growing.

These two social shifts – an increasing and increasingly public discourse around both religion and queer identity – may be discussed independently of each other or as a causal relationship in which the perceived encroachment of the LGBTQ community helped to spur the

¹ Lance Gharavi, *Religion, Theatre, and Performance: Acts of Faith* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 5.

² Stanley Fish, “One University Under God?,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 7, 2005, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/One-University-Under-God-/45077>.

political engagement of fundamentalist religious groups. It is unusual for discussions of the changing queer community or LGBTQ theatre to take religion and spirituality into account as anything but a simple force of antagonism. That is a mistake. In reality, queerness and faith share a much more complex relationship, particularly for queer people in largely religiously homogenous communities and queer people of faith (QPof). I think that, to echo Gharavi, a body of scholarship on queer theatre that does not take religion and spirituality into account in a nuanced way is an incomplete one; this dissertation moves towards filling that gap by examining the way musicals with queer characters of faith both enter into and reflect social discourse around the intersections of queerness and faith lived out by individuals who belong to both communities.

There are occasional film and television representations of religious queer people (*Latter Days*, for example), many plays (*Angels in America*, *Facing East*, *Next Fall*), and a handful of musicals depicting queer characters interacting with religion. The most common narrative of queer people and faith communities is one of an LGBTQ individual leaving their faith community (or being exiled from it) to be able to fully embrace their sexuality and/or gender identity, although there are certainly queer people who remain active participants in their faith communities. In sociology and other social sciences, this phenomenon (and the associated cognitive dissonance associated with being a part of a community assumed to be in opposition to core elements of one's identity) has spurred dizzying quantities of research.³ The field of queer theology – which combines queer theory and theology in a way that often reflects on the queerness (in the sense of difference from common norms) of faith communities/traditions,

³ For a sample of this literature, see Eric M. Rodriguez, "At the Intersection of Church and Gay: A Review of the Psychological Research on Gay and Lesbian Christians," *Journal of Homosexuality* 57, no. 1 (2009): 5–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918360903445806>.

LGBT-identified religious people, or the potential LGBT elements of faith traditions themselves – is small but vibrant. However, relatively few works of scholarship engage the particularities of mediatized narratives of queer people of faith with considerable depth, and fewer still do so with attention to the ages of the characters within or of potential audience members.

To a degree, this dissertation is activist in nature, proposing that stories about queer people of faith and can and should be told (that is, that such representation can have positive effects both for people within those demographics and the broader communities in which they participate), can and should be told in a way that is likely to be accessible to both queer and religious communities, and that the particularities of musicals' cultural position and reception habits make musicals particularly well suited to doing this work. Inevitably, conversations about LGBTQ representation in popular entertainment – particularly entertainment frequently assumed to be family-friendly, like musical theatre – include concerns about the potential effect of that representation on young people. “This is exactly what I warned you about,” Mrs. Green – the PTA president de facto antagonist of *The Prom* – tells the school principal once the students vote to allow a queer-inclusive prom in the school gym after getting to know a group of LGBTQ advocates. “Children are impressionable. If we expose them to inappropriate behavior they’ll...they’ll...”⁴ She does not finish the sentence, but viewers can fill in the gaps – they will become queer themselves, like her daughter. They will believe in the humanity of LGBTQ people. They will fail to replicate systems of oppression that are intrinsic to the identity and traditional way of life of their communities.

⁴ Bob Martin, Chad Beguelin, and Matthew Sklar, *The Prom* (Musical Libretto, 2018), 101.

People in the real world share the fictional Mrs. Green's concerns. In this dissertation, I consider not only musicals with queer characters of faith that might be viewed by young Broadway audience members or listened to by young people with Spotify or other music streaming accounts, but which contain QPoF who *are* children (adolescents) or the emergent adults (a group generally defined as between 18 and 25) into which they will soon grow. My inquiry into these works is motivated by a desire to uncover their potential to inspire community dialogue and acceptance. I am also interested in the effects these works have on the people they represent, particularly young people seeking affirmation in their identities and tools with which to discuss their identities with people who are important to them.

In the following sections, I position my research in the context of the various fields with which it intersects, laying the groundwork for how I am weaving together these disparate sources as a foundation for my in-depth analyses of the nine musicals in this dissertation. I delve into my curatorial and analytical methodologies for the project before setting expectations for the chapters to come.

Rationale/Literature Review

In *Still Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama*, John Clum writes that, given the popular association of musicals and queerness, “musical theater should be a powerful medium for depicting the contemporary gay experience.”⁵ In *Performing the Sacred*, Dale Savidge and Todd Johnson suggest that “[t]he theatre event, of all the arts, uniquely embodies the central tenets of the Christian faith.”⁶ The cultural construction of the space between sexual

⁵ John Clum, *Still Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2000), 216.

⁶ Todd E. Johnson and Dale Savidge. *Performing the Sacred (Engaging Culture): Theology and Theatre in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2009), 11.

and religious identities as, at best, a no-man's-land and at worst a site of constant conflict makes it difficult to imagine a theatre that expresses *both* the lived reality of queer people and people of (not exclusively Christian) faith, much less those oft-erased individuals who wear both identities at once. It is unsurprising, then, that very little theatre scholarship engages the complex identities of queer people of faith (QPoF). This dissertation addresses that gap.

This project is rooted in theatre studies (particularly musical theatre studies), intersects with gender and sexuality studies and religious studies, and pulls from conversations happening between and across disciplines (as in the hybrid field of queer theology). Part of the contribution of this project is simply in thematically connecting the musicals I study. Although *The Book of Mormon* is the subject of significant scholarly discourse, as are the source texts of *The Color Purple* and *Spring Awakening*, there is very little scholarship considering any musical theatre works along this particular representational axis. Putting these works in one place allows me to put them in dialogue with each other to consider how they might be usefully employed to promote community discussion, but also allows me the opportunity to draw conclusions about how these musicals capture cultural conversations already in process. (On a purely anecdotal note, the level of enthusiasm people frequently demonstrate when I discuss my project with them suggests that there is interest in the topic.) Below, I briefly outline the extant scholarship relevant to this dissertation, first outside Theatre Studies, then in Theatre Studies and overlapping fields. I offer some contextual research around adolescence and musical theatre, then finish with an overview of work pertaining to the specific musicals I explore.

Queerness, Faith, and Queer People of Faith in Non-Theatrical Fields

QPoF and particularly young QPoF may seem to be largely ignored in theatre scholarship because there simply are not enough of them to be worth considering. According to the Pew

Research Center, however, 59% of the approximately nine million LGBTQ Americans are religiously affiliated – that is over five million religious LGBTQ adults (who used to be religious LGBTQ adolescents).⁷ That statistic does not represent the queer young people of faith who did not live to adulthood (according to the Center for Disease Control, queer youth are over four times as likely to have attempted suicide in comparison to their heterosexual peers) or shed their religious identities to avoid unaffirming faith systems.⁸ QPoF are sufficiently represented in the population to spur a volume of scholarship in other fields that addresses this intersectional identity.

Religious studies, queer studies, and certain social sciences write about queer people of faith in discipline-specific ways, most of which deal explicitly with queer Christians.⁹ Robert Goss offers an analysis of the field of literature about QPoF in the twentieth century in his book *Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus Acted Up*, a follow-up to a cornerstone text in queer theology.¹⁰ According to Goss, early books considering QPoF in the 1960s and onward tried to

⁷ Benjamin Wormald, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” *Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project*, May 12, 2015; Gary J. Gates, “How Many People Are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender?,” *UCLA: The Williams Institute*, 2011.

⁸ Laura Kann, Emily O’Malley Olsen, Tim McManus, William A. Harris, Shari L. Shanklin, Katherine H. Flint, Barbara Queen, Richard Lowry, David Chyen, Lisa Whittle, Jemekia Thornton, Connie Lim, Yoshimi Yamakawa, Nancy Brener, and Stephanie Zaza, “Sexual Identity, Sex of Sexual Contacts, and Health-Related Behaviors Among Students in Grades 9–12 — United States and Selected Sites, 2015,” *MMWR Surveill* (Summer 2016): 111, <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.ss6509a1>.

⁹ There is also an extensive conversation around the topic in the field of psychology, but it is unlikely I will engage with it significantly, as Rodriguez’ literature review and my own explorations both suggest it is largely a closed conversation that does not interact with outside disciplines.

¹⁰ Robert Goss, *Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus Acted Up*, (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2002).

"reconcile the opposition of the churches to homosexuality and offer a theological interpretation of homosexuality."¹¹ The emergence of queer theory (a theoretical lens that allowed gay theology to expand into a more dimensional queer theology) created an opportunity for more nuanced explorations that led to the remarkably varied contemporary field of works engaging queer people of faith.

The sole purpose of some articles in the social sciences is to note the existence and reflect the experience of queer people of faith without theorizing further based on that qualitative data. Several researchers – for example, Tanya Erzen and J.E. Sumereau – note that the concern of both churches and LGB Christians is often as much about “appropriate” gender performance as actual sexual activity, particularly the fear of men being effeminate (and, as they are the picture of Christ in the world, thus effeminizing God and the Church).¹² Some studies are quite specific: both Bernadette Barton and Brandi Woodell, Emily Kazyak, and D’Lane Compton, for example, perform geographically specific analyses of the lived experiences of queer people of faith in the American south.¹³ Many, like the grounded theory studies performed by Michelle Wolkomir,

¹¹ Goss, 241.

¹² Tanya Erzen, “Straight to Jesus : Sexual and Christian Conversions in the Ex-Gay Movement,” 2006; J. Edward Sumerau, ““That’s What a Man Is Supposed to Do’: Compensatory Manhood Acts in an LGBT Christian Church,” *Gender & Society* 26, no. 3 (2012): 461–87, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243212439748>.

¹³ Bernadette Barton, "1CROSS + 3NAILS = 4GVN: Compulsory Christianity and Homosexuality in the Bible Belt Panopticon," *Feminist Formations* 23, no. 1 (2011): 70-93; Brandi Woodell, Emily Kazyak, and D'Lane Compton, "Reconciling LGB and Christian Identities in the Rural South," *Social Sciences* 4, no. 3 (2015): 859-878.

Rachel Murr, and Denise Levy and Patricia Reeves, focus specifically on the question of identity integration for queer people of faith.¹⁴

Even works like the grounded theory studies above that are not technically queer theology rely heavily on contemporary queer theory and gender theory to interpret the experiences of the people they study. I do not perform ethnographic research in this dissertation, but in suggesting that musicals that offer complex, realistic, and hopeful portrayals of QPoF have the opportunity to perform useful social labor it is useful to have this work as a barometer for some of the lived experience of real QPoF.

The experiences of bisexual and gender diverse people of faith are rarely addressed in the literature in any significant way aside from frequent use of the LGBT or LGBTQ as representative acronyms. While that is an area that certainly deserves additional research, it is not a hindrance to my project at present; none of the characters in these musicals explicitly identify as gender diverse or non-monosexual aside from Pythios in *Head over Heels*, who operates in a religious cosmology outside of those considered in research concerning queer people of faith.

¹⁴ Michelle Wolkomir, “Wrestling with the Angels of Meaning: The Revisionist Ideological Work of Gay and Ex-gay Christian Men,” *Symbolic Interaction*, 24, no. 4 (2001): 407-424. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1525/si.2001.24.4.407>; Rachel Murr, “‘I Became Proud of Being Gay and Proud of Being Christian’: The Spiritual Journeys of Queer Christian Women,” *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought*, 32, no. 4 (2013): 349-372. doi:10.1080/15426432.2013.839241; Denise L. Levy and Patricia Reeves, “Resolving Identity Conflict: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Individuals with a Christian Upbringing,” *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, 23, no. 1 (2011): 53-68. doi:10.1080/10538720.2010.530193

Queerness, Faith, and Queer People of Faith in Theatre

None of the above works consider queer people of faith in the context of performance, but theatre and performance scholarship certainly speaks to LGBT representation and religious content individually. There is a great deal of scholarship around theatre both by and about LGBTQ people, particularly gay men. Works like Alan Sinfield's *Out on Stage: Lesbian and Gay Theatre in the Twentieth Century*, John Clum's *Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama* and the subsequent *Still Acting Gay*, and James Fisher's edited collection "*We Will Be Citizens*": *New Essays on Gay and Lesbian Theatre* track LGBTQ theatre and occasionally mention musicals along the way.¹⁵ In musical theatre alone, early musical theatre scholarship like D.A. Miller's *Place for Us: Essay on the Broadway Musical* and John Clum's *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture* align musical theatre with queer masculinity early in queer musical theatre studies' rise to legitimacy, quickly followed by Stacy Wolf's *A Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical* exploring queer femininity's more abstract presence on the American musical stage.¹⁶ The theatre, these books suggest, was a fundamentally queer space before words like "homosexual" or "transgender" entered the common vocabulary, and has continued to be so – even, Sinfield suggests, "to the point where gay presence in the mainstream can be complained of as disproportionate."¹⁷ Work that

¹⁵ Alan Sinfield, *Out on Stage: Lesbian and Gay Theatre in the Twentieth Century*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999); Clum; James Fisher, ed., "*We Will Be Citizens*": *New Essays on Gay and Lesbian Theatre* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2008).

¹⁶ D. A. Miller, *Place for Us: Essay on the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998); John M. Clum, *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001); Stacy Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).

¹⁷ Sinfield, 1.

specifically focuses on queer female identities in theatre, however, is scarce, and work considering queer women in musicals nearly nonexistent – Playbill’s triumphant article, “From *Falsettos* to *Fun Home*: Lesbian Characters Move from Sidelines to Center Stage,” names a significant portion of the canon of musicals with explicitly queer women in its title.¹⁸ Each of these works are valuable resources for my efforts to situate the musicals I am considering within the broader scope of queer theatre, but none deal explicitly with faith or religion as a category of analysis.

Likewise, there are several works of scholarship exploring the intersections of theatre and faith. Some books consider theatrical representations of specific faith traditions, like J. Michael Hunter’s *Mormons and Popular Culture: The Global Influence of an American Phenomenon*, Kevin Wetmore’s *Catholic Theatre and Drama: Critical Essays*, Eli Rozik’s *Jewish Drama & Theatre: From Rabbinical Intolerance to Secular Liberalism*, and Henry Bial’s *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage & Screen* (which is, as per its subtitle, primarily focused on Judaism as an ethnic and cultural identity; however, there is certainly overlap between Jewish religious performance and contemporary Jewish culture).¹⁹

¹⁸ Ben Rimalower, “From Falsettos to Fun Home: Lesbian Characters Move from Sidelines to Center Stage | Playbill,” Playbill, accessed January 13, 2020, <http://www.playbill.com/article/from-falsettos-to-fun-home-lesbian-characters-move-from-sidelines-to-center-stage-com-351618>.

¹⁹ J. Michael Hunter, *Mormons and Popular Culture : The Global Influence of an American Phenomenon* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2013); Kevin J. Wetmore and Catholic Theatre Conference, *Catholic Theatre and Drama: Critical Essays* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2010); Eli Rozik, *Jewish Drama & Theatre: From Rabbinical Intolerance to Secular Liberalism* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2013); Henry Bial, *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage & Screen* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).

Steven Guthrie's *Faithful Performances: Enacting Christian Tradition* and Kathleen Brandon's *A Grounded Theory Study of Contemporary Christian Attitudes to Theatre* explore specific attitudes of certain Christian faith communities towards theatre independently of extensive specific consideration of theatrical representation. Both works reflect that people assume theatre and the Christian church operate in opposition.²⁰ Presumably as a result of this rift, a great deal of scholarship of religion (especially Christianity) and theatre considers theatre's utility to the church in a way that positions religious audiences as either outsiders - people who are likely to have strong feelings about the content of secular theatre that does not reflect them but *does* offend their sensibilities – or as artistic poachers, adapting the potentially sacrilegious form of theatre to convey religious messages themselves.

Aside from some of the examples concerning Jewishness and Mormonism above, I have found relatively little scholarship that considers the religious lives of characters in secular plays in nuanced ways; at best, religious belief seems to be positioned as just another identity category slightly less important than the unchangeable gender or race, and at worst as a challenge that needs to be overcome. Research by Denise Levy and Patricia Reeves and J. Edwards Sumerau, Ryan T. Cragun, and Lain A.B. Mathers suggests, however, that many religious people believe that their faith is at least as much an innate part of them as any other category of identity.²¹ That

²⁰ Steven R. Guthrie, *Faithful Performances: Enacting Christian Tradition*, Ashgate Studies in Theology, Imagination, and the Arts (Aldershot, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007); Kathleen Brandon, "A Grounded Theory Study of Contemporary Christian Attitudes to Theatre" (Dissertation, Wayne State University, 2013), ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

²¹ Levy and Reeves; J. Edwards Sumerau, Ryan T. Cragun, and Lain A.B. Mathers, "I Found God in the Glory Hole': The Moral Career of a Gay Christian," *Sociological Inquiry*, 86 (2016): 618–640.

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means that a nuanced consideration of QPoF in entertainment benefits from taking characters' faiths seriously as a fundamental part of their identities.

While I have not found specific works of scholarship addressing QPoF across multiple plays or musicals, there are works about specific plays and musical that put the two identity categories in conversation – for example, Ranen Omer-Sherman's article "Jewish/Queer: Thresholds of Vulnerable Identities in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*" explores queerness and faith in a single play in a way that offers guidance for my work.²² Although *Falsettos* (and the trilogy of "Marvin plays" from which William Finn and James Lapine assembled it) falls outside the scope of this dissertation, it is undoubtedly the best known musical about QPoF and has received a great deal of scholarly attention, generally in the context of its role in the canon of theatre produced depicting and surrounding the AIDS crisis – though, notably, a great deal of writing on *Falsettos* is in the form of dissertations rather than peer-reviewed articles or book-length projects. Natalie McDonald's assessment that "*Falsettos* is one of several books and plays by which we can now gauge society's reaction to AIDS and gay life" is typical of the writing surrounding the musical.²³ Jonathan C. Friedman writes about both the Jewishness of the characters and the methods by which Finn and Lapine crafted the musical itself in a way that was often culturally coded as Jewish; this consciousness of the characters' religiosity and the

²² Ranen Omer-Sherman, "Jewish/Queer: Thresholds of Vulnerable Identities in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*," *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 25, no. 4 (2007): 78–98.

²³ Natalie McDonald, "AIDS Writing in Crisis Times and Today," *The Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide* 14, no. 4 (2007): 35.

religiosity communicated to knowing audience members through formal decisions in the musical's structure offers a model for my similar efforts.²⁴

Adolescence and Emergent Adulthood

Unfortunately, both scholarship and representation drop off sharply when considering specifically adolescent queer representation. "I don't think you see me," Kyra, an ensemble member in *bare: A Pop Opera*, sings to her school's theatre instructor; she is quickly echoed by the rest of the adolescent company.²⁵ It is a sentiment many queer teenagers share. Until shortly before the new millennium, it was literally true for most forms of media – LGBTQ youth were ignored or cast in minor roles as jokes or cautionary tales, the lack of representation captured in an early 1990s television study by Alfred P. Kielwasser and Michelle A. Wolf as a "symbolic annihilation of gay and lesbian youth" that contributed to "a dysfunctional isolation that is supported by the mutually reinforcing invisibility of homosexual adolescents [in media] and in the real world."²⁶

This is partially a function of high schoolers' age – since they are not yet adults, plays written specifically for them tend to be coded as Theatre for Young Audiences, which Manon van de Waters (the Chair of the International Theatre for Young Audiences Research Network)

²⁴ Jonathan C. Friedman, "Jewish Voices of Protest on Broadway: From The Eternal Road to The Cradle Will Rock and Beyond," in *The Routledge History of Social Protest in Popular Music*, ed. Jonathan C. Friedman (New York: Routledge, 2013).

²⁵ Jon Hartmere and Damon Intrabartolo, *Bare: A Pop Opera* (New York, NY: Theatrical Rights Worldwide, 2000): 19.

²⁶ Alfred P. Kielwasser and Michelle A. Wolf, "Mainstream Television, Adolescent Homosexuality, and Significant Silence," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 9, no. 4 (1992): 350.

notes “has been virtually ignored by theatre scholars.”²⁷ (It is worth noting, however, that both her book *Theatre, Youth, and Culture: A Critical and Historical Exploration* and Paula Ressler’s *Dramatic Changes: Talking about Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity with High School Students through Drama* consider queer narratives in theatre with adolescents, though not musicals specifically.)²⁸ Plays written about or including teenage characters that do not fall under TYA do, of course, exist, and a few of them include queer characters – *Fun Home*, *Glory Days*, and *Spring Awakening* all include canonically queer characters under 18 and appeared on or off-Broadway – and musicals set in high schools like *Carrie* and *Grease* acknowledge the existence of queer people through homophobic jokes.

Musicals with queer adolescent or emergent adult characters of faith, however, are rarer, and acceptance is more challenging for queer young people in religious communities than those without religious affiliations. A 2018 study, “Association of Religiosity With Sexual Minority Suicidal Ideation and Attempt,” found that adolescents and emergent adults (college students, in the study) were more likely to experience suicidal ideation or attempt suicide if they were active participants in a non-affirming faith community.²⁹ In her research exploring the faith experiences of LGBTQ adolescents and emergent adults, Angie Dahl discovered that two-thirds of her

²⁷ Manon van de Waters, *Theatre, Youth, and Culture: A Critical and Historical Exploration* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012): 2.

²⁸ Van de Waters; Paula Ressler, *Dramatic Changes: Talking about Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity with High School Students through Drama* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002).

²⁹ Megan C. Lytle, John R Blosnich, Susan M De Luca, and Chris Brownson, "Association of Religiosity with Sexual Minority Suicide Ideation and Attempt," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 54, no. 5 (2018): 644-651.

participants reflected faith-based conflict with their coming out process.³⁰ Although identifying as a Christian, specifically, puts an individual in a majority identity category in the United States and tends to be associated with mental health benefits, Dahl’s research suggests that being a practicing Christian *increases* marginalization of queer people of faith who attempt to participate in two communities that often believe membership is mutually exclusive. Only when individuals were able to reconcile their sexual and spiritual identities (either through joining affirming congregations, coming to personal conclusions that their identity was acceptable, or leaving the faith community) were they able to enter into a “process of self-acceptance.”³¹ Dahl’s participants reflected that being able to view other people like themselves was integral to their self-acceptance amidst social turmoil; Dahl discovered that “negative social experiences may be less destructive when positive role models are secured.”³²

Several dissertations focus specifically on adolescents and emergent adults participating in musical theatre as actors, but most do not engage the sexual orientation or religious lives of those young people or note whether musical theatre (or theatre participation more broadly) was associated with queerness in students’ communities. Much of the work about queerness and musical theatre assumes that musical theatre is a refuge for LGBTQ young people and emergent adults. This assumption is affirmed in qualitative projects like Theodore McCadden Jr.’s dissertation, “For People Who Aren't Sure Who They Are, Theatre is A Great Place to Be’:

³⁰ Angie Dahl, “Sexual and Religious Identity Development among Adolescent and Emerging Adult Sexual Minorities” (Dissertation, Utah State University, 2012), ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

³¹ Dahl, 102.

³² Dahl, 101.

Narratives of Actors and Their Sexual Identities.”³³ Peer-reviewed articles like Stacy Wolf’s “Wicked Divas, Musical Theater, and Internet Girl Fans” and Carol L. Schnabl Schweitzer’s “A Parable, A Pearl” and “‘Popular’? How the Broadway Musical *Wicked*—Especially Elphaba’s Character—May Assist Adolescent Girls to Claim Their Uniqueness” both engage a specific musical’s potential role in identity development.³⁴ *Wicked* is not part of this dissertation, but it is not unreasonable to assume that the same patterns of identification and fan connection adolescents display in their connections to *Wicked* might apply to other musical theatre offerings.

For more specific insight into adolescent and emergent adult modes of identity development through media depicting adolescent and emergent adult characters, especially LGBTQ characters, I rely on work from the field of media studies. Alexander Dhoest and Nele Simons’s 2012 study revealed that media (books, movies, etc.) have “a role in the process of self-definition” for LGB people, particularly for those seeking support during the coming out process.³⁵ Their respondents suggested that queer media was important not only for those questioning their sexuality or identifying as LGB but as a tool for their families to better understand them. This tendency to turn to media for mentorship in identity formation is

³³ Theodore McCadden Jr., “For People Who Aren’t Sure Who They Are, Theatre Is a Great Place to Be’: Narratives of Actors and Their Sexual Identities” (Doctoral Dissertation, The Pennsylvania State University, 2015).

³⁴ Stacy Wolf, “Wicked Divas, Musical Theater, and Internet Girl Fans,” *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 22, no. 2 65 (2007), http://cameraobscura.dukejournals.org/cgi/content/abstract/25/1_73/29; Carol Schweitzer, “A Parable, A Pearl and ‘Popular’? How the Broadway Musical *Wicked*—Especially Elphaba’s Character—May Assist Adolescent Girls to Claim Their Uniqueness,” *Pastoral Psychology* 61, no. 4 (2012): 499–511, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-011-0421-0>.

³⁵ Alexander Dhoest and Nele Simons, “Questioning Queer Audiences: Exploring Diversity in Lesbian and Gay Men’s Media Uses and Readings,” in *The Handbook of Gender, Sex, and Media*, ed. by Karen Ross (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 268.

especially marked among adolescents, Michaela Meyer suggests, both as a reflection of their limited access to LGBTQ people outside their communities and the increasingly earlier ages at which people are identifying as queer.³⁶

Representation alone, however, was not enough; Dhoest and Simons's respondents suggested that they valued (and saw a continued need for the expansion of) non-stereotypical representations of LGB people as "normal" members of society with the same diverse experiences as any other given subsection of the population.³⁷ Lauren B. McInroy and Shelley L. Craig's research indicates that media representations of queer youth are currently often "dominated by themes of vulnerability and victimization," depicting them as "in need of adult or institutional protection;" protection that, according to Meyer, rarely comes.³⁸ Characters perform their genders at far ends of the gender spectrum (heightened femininity or masculinity) and are often homogenous across other markers of identity (age, race, ethnicity, ability, etc.).³⁹ They are often either oversexualized (in the case of gay men portrayed as sexually promiscuous and insatiable) or desexualized (in the instance of lesbians portrayed as being exclusively interested

³⁶ Michaela D. E. Meyer, "'It's Me. I'm It.': Defining Adolescent Sexual Identity through Relational Dialectics in Dawson's Creek." *Communication Quarterly* 51, no. 3 (2003): 262–276.

³⁷ Dhoest and Simons, 270.

³⁸ Lauren B. McInroy and Shelley L. Craig, "Perspectives of LGBTQ Emerging Adults on the Depiction and Impact of LGBTQ Media Representation," *Journal of Youth Studies* 20, no. 1 (2017): 35; Michaela Meyer, "'I'm Just Trying to Find My Way Like Most Kids': Bisexuality, Adolescence and the Drama of One Tree Hill," *Sexuality & Culture* 13, no. 4 (2009): 237–251.

³⁹ Gilad Padva, "Edge of Seventeen: Melodramatic Coming-out in New Queer Adolescence Films," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 1, no. 4 (2004): 363.

in the emotional aspects of romantic relationships).⁴⁰ Throughout this dissertation, I am conscious of how these musicals subvert or reinscribe representational tropes.

Although the studies cited above engage combinations of television, film, books, and new media rather than theatre, theatre (and particularly musical theatre) is also an important source of comfort and affirmation, especially for queer teens. Television shows like “GLEE” and films like *CAMP* and *Were the World Mine* affirm that the association between musical theatre and queer identities is also firmly in play for adolescents. Jennifer Chapman’s analysis of heteronormativity in high school theatre demonstrates that high school drama departments (and University theatre departments housing students in late adolescence and early emergent adulthood) often function as safe spaces for the “different” young people (where “different” is almost invariably a coded form of “LGBTQ”).⁴¹

Theatre, then, has a particular kind of access to young queer people that makes it useful as a vehicle for narratives intended for their consumption. Musical theatre allows audience members to engage not only in self-definition but in self-expression (as explained in the following section). These musicals work best when they allow audience members to experience their protagonists engaging the representational trend celebrated by Shelley Craig, Lauren McInroy, Lance McCready, and Ramona Alaggia: resilience.⁴² Craig, et al. suggest that queer

⁴⁰ Lyn Freymiller, “Separate or Equal? Gay Viewers Respond to Same-Sex and Gay/Straight Relationships on TV” (International Communication Association, New York, 2005), 4-5.

⁴¹ Jennifer Chapman, “The Theatre Kids: Heteronormativity and High School Theatre” (Dissertation, The University of Wisconsin, 2005), ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

⁴² Shelley L. Craig; McInroy, Lauren; McCready, Lance; Alaggia, Ramona, “Media: A Catalyst for Resilience in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Youth,” *Journal of LGBT Youth* 12 (2015): 254, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2015.1040193>.

youth engage media to support their resilience through four main strategies: “coping through escapism; feeling stronger; fighting back; and finding and fostering community.”⁴³ One of the principal arguments of this dissertation is that musicals depicting QPoF are valuable *for* QPoF, evidence that they are not alone, that theirs is a valid way of being in the world. That does not mean it is an easy way of being; resilience is important. I call attention to the musicals in this dissertation that not only offer inspiration for engaging in these tools for resilience but model their use.

Musical Theatre and Reception

Musical theatre offers several of the benefits of other studied media forms. Like television shows, musical theatre takes time to delve into relationships between characters and the depths of characters’ psychological realities (though this happens through the partitioning of reality via song rather than episodic structure); in much the same way as an episode can pause the main plot to explore a particular character’s backstory, songs allow a particular character to take the spotlight and invite the audience into their unique experience. With the advent of online spaces for listening to cast recordings for free (particularly Spotify) and for watching performances of selections from musicals via television spots, online marketing campaigns, and bootlegs (YouTube), theatre enthusiasts have free access to a great deal of content. A young person’s free Spotify or YouTube account on their phone or computer is more private than their feed on the family account for the various film and television streaming services. Kielwasser and Wolf suggest that privacy is an important factor in the selection of media engaged by closeted young people hoping to avoid their family discovering their queer-affiliated media.⁴⁴

⁴³ Craig, et al.

⁴⁴ Kielwasser and Wolf, 350.

Musical theatre occupies a series of (apparently conflicting) spaces in the social imaginary. The reasons for my focus on musical theatre, in particular, are twofold: first, as Brandon points out, many people think of musical theatre as a “gay thing.”⁴⁵ Queer representation in the theatrical form so closely tied to queer people, then, is particularly important to consider. Second, musical theatre is a commercial form – it is intended to make money, and therefore to appeal to broad audiences. Although, as Wolf points out in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*, the commercial nature of the form means it has previously often “failed to register as a legitimate topic for scholarly study,” it also means that musicals are likely to draw more audience members who might not be “theatre people,” offering musical producers and creators the opportunity to reach out to audiences who might be less comfortable with similar content in a non-musical play.⁴⁶ (*Angels in America*, a much-lauded play that, in part, addresses the experience of a queer religious character, nods to this with a joke about Roy Cohn getting *CATS* tickets for tourists.) To put it differently, musicals are perceived as “safe” theatre in a way other genres are not.⁴⁷ The same nice, middle- and upper-middle-class (generally white) people who make up the congregations of churches in the suburbs presumably also make

⁴⁵ Brandon, 201.

⁴⁶ Stacy Wolf, “Introduction,” in *The Oxford Handbook of The American Musical*, ed. Raymond Knapp, Mitchell Morris, and Stacy Wolf, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3.

⁴⁷ Kathleen Brandon’s research on Christian attitudes towards theatre reflects that musicals are felt to be “more playful and less substantial” than plays (124). This underlying social expectation is visible in a great deal of early musical theatre scholarship’s efforts to assert the legitimacy of the field. The assumption of the “nonseriousness” of the musical is referenced, for example, in the introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Musical Theatre*. Some scholars – D.A. Miller and Bruce Kirle, for example – suggest that happy endings and escapism are inherent to the musical comedy form (or, in Miller’s opinion, to *good* musicals).

up the bulk of the audience for touring Broadway musical productions or other (sufficiently publicized and recognizable) theatrical offerings in their community.

The unfortunate reality, of course, is that the very content that engages one group of potential audience members might alienate others, and such risks must be managed carefully in a social context in which theatres are seeking to attract additional subscribers without losing their existing subscriber base.⁴⁸ When an entire musical is predicated on a potential conflict between sexual and religious identity, even a vocal and vibrant LGBTQ and allied fan base does not negate the concern that older and particularly religious patrons might find the subject matter objectionable. It is a fair consideration – in her study on contemporary Christian attitudes towards theatre, Brandon uncovered that, indeed, some Christians were nervous about attending an institution that has “often appealed to the lifestyles [they have] always been against . . . showing adulterous, materialistic, or homosexual lifestyles onstage . . . as something to emulate or celebrate.”⁴⁹ Respondents were not interested in viewing productions that included an uncritical glorification of values that seemed antithetical to the values of their faith communities. They indicated that the best theatre managed “to reflect truth in a way consistent with their worldview and faith.”⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Joanne Ostrow, “The Dilemma of the Aging Theater Audience: How to Draw a Younger Crowd,” *The Denver Post* (blog), December 3, 2015, <https://www.denverpost.com/2015/12/03/the-dilemma-of-the-aging-theater-audience-how-to-draw-a-younger-crowd/>.

⁴⁹ Brandon, 113-114.

⁵⁰ Brandon, 114.

One of Brandon's respondents said, "I feel like theater images stick in your head more powerfully than movies, I feel like it sticks with you better."⁵¹ Though the respondent was speaking about the reasons why being cautious about the theatre one consumes is even more important than being wary of other kinds of media, the statement also supports the idea that theatre can affect viewers in lasting ways that can lead to social change or at least intercommunity conversation. Research supports the idea that all theatre, to some degree, has both a physiological and intellectual/emotional impact on viewers. Empirical data has recorded audience members' physical reactions to onstage action – for example, Janelle G. Reinelt reports that a study recorded that patrons' "heart rates went up during critical moments in performance," and her longitudinal study of theatregoers revealed that patrons were likely to retain key elements of their theatrical experiences well after the play's conclusion.⁵²

I echo the arguments of other musical theatre scholars that musicals are particularly well-equipped to encourage audiences to engage with potentially difficult or divisive material empathetically. Carl Rogers, the founder of humanist psychology, reflected that empathy is one's "sensitive ability and willingness to understand [another's] thoughts, feelings and struggles from [their] point of view," but it is also one's ability to enter "the private perceptual world of the other."⁵³ Psychologists Robert Elliot, Arthur Bohart, Jeanne Watson, and Leslie Greenberg say that entering this world makes "it possible [for individuals] to mobilize compassion and helping behavior for the other;" helping behavior that can lead to positive social change.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Brandon, 114.

⁵² Janelle Reinelt, "What UK Spectators Know: Understanding How We Come to Value Theatre," *Theatre Journal* 66, no. 3 (2014): 339. doi:10.1353/tj.2014.0099.

⁵³ Carl R. Rogers, *A Way of Being* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980): 85, 142.

⁵⁴ Robert Elliot, Arthur Bohart, Jeanne Watson, and Leslie Greenberg. "Empathy."

Empathy is not only understanding what others feel, then, but being able to encounter those feelings more personally – perhaps, one could say, to embody them. Musical theatre lends itself to “a performative spectatorship” that Michelle Dvoskin explains as the ways in which “[a]udiences for musicals do not simply watch and listen; they engage kinesthetically, from the most subtle head movement, to tapping fingers to the beat, to feet mimicking dance steps under a chair.”⁵⁵ Even audience members who might not share a character’s specific identity categories physically align themselves with the performers on stage when they physically respond to their music. Koritha Mitchell explains that, while audience members’ minds are paying attention to the content of the narrative onstage:

their bodies are also fully present and capable of responding to their ties to the humanity of the figures encountered, both the character and the actor. That is, before viewers' socialization can suggest that those onstage are of no relation to them, their flesh can viscerally register the human connection.⁵⁶

Musicals invite visceral responses in the moment that align audience members with characters with whom they might feel they have nothing in common on a surface level. That can be true (though, I would argue, to a lesser extent) of any theatre, but musical theatre frequently physically remains with audience members beyond the theatre walls. When patrons find themselves humming pieces of a song performed in the show, they are literally performing elements of that character’s identity.

Psychotherapy 48.1 (2011): 43-9. *ProQuest*. Web. 14 Dec. 2016.

⁵⁵ Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria*, 33; Michelle Dvoskin, “Listen to the Stories, Hear it in the Songs: Musical Theatre as Queer Historiography” (Dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2010), 368.

⁵⁶ Koritha Mitchell, "James Baldwin, Performance Theorist, Sings the Blues for Mister Charlie." *American Quarterly* 64.1 (2012): 40. Web.

Show-Specific Scholarship

Scholarly attention to the musicals in this dissertation is, with notable exceptions, lacking. In *Sex, Drugs, and Rock and Roll*, Scott Miller offers the only analysis of *bare* in a book-length project (though it is encyclopedically indexed in Thomas Hischak's *Off-Broadway Musicals since 1919: From Greenwich Village Follies to The Toxic Avenger*).⁵⁷

Otherwise, *bare* scholarship is limited, with only a few instances such as Casey McNamara's MFA thesis in Scenography and Bryan Reesman's interview with the revival production's sound designer.⁵⁸ Miller's brief essay performs helpful contextual and musicological analysis of the production's first incarnation. His assertion that the musical is deserving of increased attention despite its poor-to-middling critical response serves as a point in the musical's favor, and this dissertation contributes to the scholarship on this work that continues to enjoy a rich life in queer theatre companies and other "underground" production venues.

The musical version of *The Color Purple* has been the subject of little scholarship beyond production reviews in peer-reviewed theatre journals (reviews by both Nicole Hodges Persley and Laura MacDonald point out the plot point of Celie and Shug's affair but do not comment on it further) and a journal article in *Ecumenica* exploring the 2015 revival as African American

⁵⁷ Scott Miller, *Sex, Drugs, Rock & Roll, and Musicals* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 2011); Thomas S. Hischak, *Off-Broadway Musicals since 1919: From Greenwich Village Follies to The Toxic Avenger* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2011).

⁵⁸ Casey McNamara, "Bare: A Pop Opera" (MFA Thesis, University of Kansas, 2016), <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1811649967?pq-origsite=primo>; Bryan Reesman, "The Full Sound of Bare," *Stage Directions* 26, no. 1 (2013): 16–17.

church, but the novel is well represented in scholarship.⁵⁹ Cheryl Townsend Gilkes' chapter in *Personal Knowledge and Beyond: Reshaping the Ethnography of Religion*, "A Conscious Connection to All That Is: The Color Purple as Subversive and Critical Ethnography," engages the novel as an exploration of religion.⁶⁰ Christopher Lewis' article, "Cultivating Black Lesbian Shamelessness: Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*," considers the queerness of the text but makes only a brief reference to the connection between Celie's religion and sexuality.⁶¹ I consider the ways the original and revival performances of *The Color Purple* handle Shug and Celie's relationship in the context of African American theologies.

Performance reviews also make up the bulk of peer-reviewed writing engaging the musical adaptation of *Spring Awakening*, though some – such as Peter Zazzali's long-form review in *Communications from the International Brecht Society*, "Lost and Found in Adaptation: Reinventing *Spring Awakening* as a Rock Musical" – do offer extended engagement with the musical in its socio-political context rather than solely considering the production alone.⁶² Sean J. Bliznik's dissertation, "Constructing the Youth in Commercial Musical Theatre:

⁵⁹ Nicole Hodges Persley, "The Color Purple (Review)," *Theatre Journal* 60, no. 1 (2008): 143–44; Laura Macdonald, "The Color Purple/The Scottsboro Boys," *Theatre Journal* 66, no. 3 (2014): 444–448; Aaron Brown, "Hallelujah and Amen: The Revival of The Color Purple as African-American Church," *Ecumenica* 11, no. 1 (2018): 63–72, <https://doi.org/10.5325/ecumenica.11.1.0063>.

⁶⁰ Cheryl Townsend, "A Conscious Connection to All That Is: The Color Purple as Subversive and Critical Ethnography," in *Personal Knowledge and beyond : Reshaping the Ethnography of Religion*, ed. James V Spickard, J. Shawn Landres, and Meredith B McGuire (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 275–96.

⁶¹ Christopher S Lewis, "Cultivating Black Lesbian Shamelessness: Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*," *Rocky Mountain Review* 66, no. 2 (2012): 167–84.

⁶² Peter Zazzali, "Long Form: Essays, Reviews, Interviews: Lost and Found in Adaptation: Reinventing Frank Wedekind's 'Spring Awakening' as a Rock Musical," *Communications from the International Brecht Society*, 2007, 135–42.

An Intersectional Case Study,” offers a consideration of the role of sexuality in *Spring Awakening*, though religion does not feature prominently in Bliznik’s analysis.⁶³

The Book of Mormon is studied most notably in Holly Welker and Marc E. Shaw’s edited volume, *Singing and Dancing to the Book of Mormon: Critical Essays on the Broadway Musical*.⁶⁴ Jake Johnson’s article “Mormons, Musical Theatre, and the Public Arena of Doubt” and Hunter’s book (referenced above) both also refer to *The Book of Mormon*, generally referring to it as an enjoyable work of theatre that, if not always theologically sound, at least often reflects many relevant aspects of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints faith tradition in fun-loving ways.⁶⁵ The only source that extensively considers queerness in the musical – Kellen Hoxworth’s “Strains of the Enlightenment: Making Belief in American Secularism and African Difference in *The Book of Mormon*” – problematizes the way queerness is racialized in the scene in which a missionary is sodomized using a copy of *The Book of Mormon*.⁶⁶ The queerness of the missionary from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints who sings about “turning it off” – and what that singing, tap-dancing queerness means in contrast to the queer violence Hoxworth rightfully points out – has not yet been extensively critically explored.

⁶³ Sean Bliznik, “Constructing the Youth in Commercial Musical Theatre: An Intersectional Case Study” (Doctoral Dissertation, Arizona State University, 2012).

⁶⁴ Marc Edward Shaw and Holly Welker, *Singing and Dancing to The Book of Mormon: Critical Essays on the Broadway Musical* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2016).

⁶⁵ Jake Johnson, “Mormons, Musical Theater, and the Public Arena of Doubt,” *Dialogue* 48, no. 4 (2015): 89–114; Hunter.

⁶⁶ Kellen Hoxworth, “Strains of the Enlightenment: Making Belief in American Secularism and African Difference in *The Book of Mormon*,” *Mod. Drama* 60, no. 3 (2017): 364–86, <https://doi.org/10.3138/MD.0814>.

Kevin Christopher Crowe’s dissertation, “Words That Wound: LGBTQ Playwrights Respond to Bullying and Teen Suicide,” engages *Choir Boy* at some length, though his work on the play with music focuses largely on the intersections of LGBTQ identity and race with little attention to religion; Alisha Lola Jones notes *Choir Boy* as an example in her dissertation investigating “meaning, masculinity, and competence in gendered gospel performance.”⁶⁷ David Román’s review essay in *American Quarterly*, “The Distant Present of Terrell Alvin McCraney,” marks the full extent of peer-reviewed scholarship on the musical.⁶⁸

Head Over Heels, *The Prom*, and *Kid Victory* have not yet been featured in peer-reviewed scholarship focused on the content of the musicals (though *Head Over Heels* is the subject of a lighting design article in *Projection, Lights & Staging News*.)⁶⁹

In sum, the recently-fledgling fields of queer theology and musical theatre studies have grown significantly in the new millennium, as have the presence on and off-Broadway of musicals including QPoF (though, of course, they still represent a very small subset of the musicals produced). This dissertation combines these fields, using the theoretical bridges between theology and queer theory as a lens to analyze the potential for bridge-building work displayed (or eschewed) by the musicals within.

⁶⁷ Kevin Christopher Crowe, “Words That Wound: LGBTQ Playwrights Respond to Bullying and Teen Suicide” (Doctoral Dissertation, University of Colorado, 2017); Alisha Lola Jones, “‘We Are a Peculiar People’: Meaning, Masculinity, and Competence in Gendered Gospel Performance” (Doctoral Dissertation, The University of Chicago, 2015).

⁶⁸ David Román, “The Distant Present of Tarell Alvin McCraney,” *American Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (2014): 181–195.

⁶⁹ Bryan Reesman, “Musical A Go-Go’s *Head Over Heels* on Broadway,” *Projection, Lights & Staging News* 19, no. 8 (2018): 24–25.

Methodology

Research that engages intersectional identities requires interdisciplinary approaches. I engage various lenses of theology and queer theory to perform close readings of the librettos, cast recordings, and available archival footage of the musicals in question. I suggest that the most effective musicals are those that honor the complexity of the identities of QPoF without demonizing or disregarding either queer or religious communities. The purpose of my close readings is to offer theoretically-informed suggestions about how audience members from the above demographic groups might interpret the musical. At their best, these musicals honor the diversity of queer communities and communities of faith, offering opportunities for practicing empathy “across the aisle” to straight and cis religious audience members and nonreligious queer audiences. They offer representation to QPoF reassuring them that they are not alone and, more importantly, offer opportunities for rehearsing resilience and problem-solving the challenges of their intersectional identities without sacrificing parts of themselves to survive.

While one can make educated conjectures about an audience’s experience, it is impossible to make fully accurate predictions about that experience, particularly without the ability to poll or otherwise engage the actual audience members who attended the event. I combat this challenge in three ways. First, I rely on reviews from as many sources as possible to not only provide some degree of information about audience responses but also about the way the musical operated in the sociopolitical context of its first production; by comparing many reviews, I aim to avoid taking a single critic’s (potentially biased) point of view as characteristic of every audience member. Secondly, I consider – where useful and appropriate – wider media attention to the musicals, both in the form of popular media (news stories, television performances, etc.) and new media forms like blogs and YouTube videos. This allows me access

to a less professionally cultivated narrative around audience response, as do my personal experiences engaging with adolescent and emergent adult musical theatre fans and practitioners around these musicals. Finally, I rely on research capturing the values and lived experiences of members of the various communities I consider to attempt to track the ways in which musical content interacts with those values and reflects (or fails to reflect) the majority of those lived experiences. (This is particularly important when considering the possible viewpoints of audiences experiencing these musicals outside of New York City in regional or community productions or through online engagement platforms.)

I take heed of John Fletcher's call in *Preaching to Convert: Evangelical Outreach and Performance Activism in a Secular Age* to engage religious systems with a spirit of critical generosity.⁷⁰ The question of whether a particular faith system is "real" or more or less valid than another is immaterial to my study; I take the legitimacy of the faith system in a musical as a given within the world of the musical and engage that faith system's doctrine and traditions as a moral authority in that particular context. I operate under the assumption that audience members who share the specific faith system held by characters in a given musical are likely to be particularly attuned to the authenticity (or lack thereof) of characters' engagements with the attitudes, documents, and traditions of that faith system and so center the experiences of religious audience members who share doctrinal alignment with the characters in my readings. (I do also occasionally contrast this specific in-group knowledge with potential alternate readings or misreadings that may occur in mainstream Protestant Christian audience members when there is a significant likelihood of such an occurrence.) My personal status as a queer woman and

⁷⁰ John Fletcher, *Preaching to Convert: Evangelical Outreach and Performance Activism in a Secular Age* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013).

lifelong participant in a branch of the Protestant Christian church has also influenced my readings. While I have done extensive denomination-specific research for each musical and on the subject positions of queer people of faith who reconcile and articulate their identities differently than I do, my first experience with the vast majority of the musicals in this dissertation was as an audience member with my particular subject position rather than as a researcher.

I began this process by identifying as many Broadway and Off-Broadway musicals as possible that included queer characters of faith, seeking musicals both through word of mouth and through keyword searches of reviews and other online sources of musical knowledge. I am defining “musicals” as stage productions that utilize music sung by the characters to express realities of their inner lives and communicate with each other and/or the audience. While the idea of an “integrated” musical is a controversial one, I *am* suggesting that musicals use songs to further the plot and offer additional information about the characters singing. *Indecent*, for example, uses music in interesting and exciting ways, but characters do not communicate their interior realities through song – it is a play with music, and therefore outside the scope of this study. (While *Choir Boy* is also billed as a play with music, there are moments in which music reflects characters’ internal realities in a way that makes it operate more like a musical.)

I am choosing to engage musicals specifically partly to keep the scope of the study manageable – including all the nonmusical plays with queer characters of faith would prevent me from engaging each piece in the depth of analysis I intend – and partly because musicals have specific qualities of commercial expectations, audience engagement and (of course) form, as previously discussed. My decision to limit my search to Broadway and Off-Broadway as opposed to musicals that had not been produced in those venues is one of practicality; my

interest is in the abilities of these musicals to encourage social change and invite conversation, and the musicals that have the best chance of doing that are those performed in venues that offer the most possible audience members access to the work. Access to Broadway and Off-Broadway venues implies a certain degree of vetting and development (though I do intend to reference certain developing musicals in my conclusion) that suggests the musicals are both relatively stable – unlikely to change significantly in future productions – and more likely to later be available for license for widespread productions. New York runs both legitimate musicals (at least those developed in the United States) in a way that validates fans’ interests and makes it possible for fans to have access to some facet of the musical to explore said interest: while many people cannot or do not travel to New York to see theatre or cannot afford the price of a theatre ticket, Broadway and Off-Broadway productions are more likely than regional productions to offer cast recordings, generate media attention (giving interested parties access to interviews and reviews in addition to televised performance samples), and offer access to the materials in the form of cast recordings and published librettos. To ensure that the musicals I engaged *were* at least somewhat accessible to people who were not able to see the New York productions, I further limited my research to those shows with cast recordings or published librettos. (With the exception of *Bare: The Musical*, I was able to access librettos for all the musicals through perusal scripts and generosity on the part of librettists willing to share their work. I use those librettos as baselines for my analyses whether or not they are commercially available.)

My definition of “queer characters of faith” is specific in order to allow me to study only those musicals where the creative team intentionally wrote queer characters of faith (as opposed to characters one could or could not choose to read as characters of faith). In looking for queer characters, I limited my search to characters who either 1) explicitly verbally identify as part of

the LGBTQ spectrum or 2) engage in same-sex sexual activity or diverse gender expression or verbally express a desire to do so. This excluded, for example, *Altar Boyz*, which strongly implies that Mark is gay but does not actually include the character identifying his sexuality or being intimate with another man. Throughout, I favor the descriptor “queer” (intended as a catchall label for not-heterosexual or not-cisgender identities) over more specific labels like “gay” or “lesbian” unless a character explicitly names their sexuality or gender identity. While characters living before the late 1980s would not have used the word “queer” in this way – in fact, one of the characters in *bare: a pop opera* uses “queer” as a slur in the early 2000s – I feel that the anachronism is the lesser inaccuracy compared to imposing a more specific label on a character that is actively incorrect.

“Characters of faith” includes characters who either explicitly identify as being religious or participate in religious activity (church services, prayers, etc.). In actuality, apart from the characters of *Head Over Heels*, all the characters I found belonged to Judeo-Christian faith traditions; adding the additional limiting factor of adolescence or emergent adulthood, explained below, narrowed the scope further to Christian faith traditions alone. I retain the language of “queer characters of faith” rather than “queer Christian characters” for two reasons: first, the intention of the project was to discover all characters of faith, and I do not want to bury the fact that there is almost no religious diversity in this field under language that reads as if I intentionally limited my samples to Christianity. Second, there is contention within Christian denominations about who else “counts” as “properly” Christian, and that is not a debate into which I am interested in wading. As a result, I describe characters denominationally when that information is available.

When attempting to identify possible interpretations of religious audience members, I do so with the assumption that audience members who share the depicted denomination will have the most specific interpretations (as they have lived in-group knowledge of the faith system in question). I am also aware that the majority of audience members who identify as religious practice some subset of Christianity – the Religious Landscape Study found that roughly 70% of people polled identified as Christian – and therefore engage a broader Christian lens of analysis in consideration of each musical.⁷¹ Christianity is a major political force in the United States; despite having no official national religion, many of the country’s laws and organizing principles are created to align with Christianity. This is particularly true in the current political moment as laws are suggested that protect “religious freedom” at the expense of protecting LGBTQ people and other marginalized populations from discrimination. That means that it is particularly important to me to consider how these musicals may be able to make small interventions into the attitudes and beliefs of Christians who are not only involved in the lives of queer people they know personally but may be making hiring and housing decisions within their communities, influencing programming decisions at their local arts organizations, affecting market viability for queer community spaces, or otherwise using their combined numbers and political clout to either create more or less open and accepting communities for LGBTQ people, including those within their ranks.

A note on terminology: wherever possible, I use the best practices set forth by specific denominations to refer to them. (For example, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints prefers to be referred to by its full name rather than the common “LDS Church” or “Mormons,”

⁷¹ Wormald.

so I maintain that convention.)⁷² As per convention, I capitalize names and pronouns used in reference to the Divine. When a character is speaking to or referencing a specific and identifiable aspect of the Divine – God, Jesus, Mary, Zeus, etc. – I name that aspect specifically. Throughout, however, I use the label of “the Divine” in reference to characters’ communication with higher powers more generally in order to avoid suggesting narrative specificity where there is none (in *bare: a pop opera*, for example, Peter addresses a nonspecific divine “you” and Mary responds, but Jesus or some other holy person might have responded; there is nothing to indicate to whom Peter was praying within the realm of possible people to whom Peter could pray within the confines of his theology) or creating confusion between God-the-general-potentially-triune-Divine-being-of-Christianity and God-the-Father-in-the-Trinity.

I further limit my considerations to musicals dealing with characters in the life stages of adolescence and emergent adulthood. Those stories made up the overwhelming majority of musicals and choosing to isolate them allows me to be more specific in my comparisons. Furthermore, adolescents and emergent adults are in crucial stages of identity formation; those stories both allow for the closest analysis of the ways cultural ideas around queerness and faith affect development in the media form of these musicals *and* offer the most specific representation to adolescents and emergent adults in the audience. As demonstrated above, those groups are particularly likely to be strongly affected by media representations. Queer adolescents and emergent adults of faith are particularly likely to suffer negative consequences if they are unable to reconcile their identities or are unable to be accepted in their communities, so

⁷² Associated Press, “Don't Use 'Mormon' or 'LDS' as Church Name, President Says,” *NBC News*, Aug. 16, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/don-t-use-mormon-or-lds-church-name-president-says-n901491>.

identifying musicals that encourage both self-acceptance and acceptance within community structures is particularly important.

All the musicals in this dissertation depict QPoF in adolescence and emergent adulthood, but they are diverse in their setting, style of music, and other narrative elements. In order to allow for the most accurate comparative analyses possible, the chapters are organized thematically, moving from those with the most explicit internal debates about queerness and faith to those musicals that address the issue less directly. I draw on both theology and queer theory to allow for additional nuance in each chapter and to highlight the social work those particular musicals are doing. Though the musicals within this dissertation were all written in the new millennium, the fifteen years they span was marked by rapid changes in LGBTQ rights and public perception that are reflected in the ways these musicals explore their queer characters of faith. To that end, the chapters within the dissertation are divided thematically but case studies within each chapter appear in chronological order.

Outline

The first half of this dissertation considers adolescent QPoF in contemporary high school settings and includes the oldest and newest case studies (the 2004 off-Broadway production of *bare: a pop opera* and the Broadway production of *The Prom* that closed in August 2019) represented in this dissertation. The high school setting aligns these musicals closely with contemporary film, television, and new media depictions of adolescence, and I engage research in these representational trends to attend to the resilience displayed by these queer teens of faith. Faith is particularly explicit in these musicals. *Bare: a pop opera*, *Bare: The Musical*, *The Prom*, and *Choir Boy* explicitly engage with Christian theology through depictions of church services, worship music, and Biblical analysis, with most directly addressing perceived tensions between

queerness and faith. Chapter one (examining *bare: a pop opera* and *Bare: The Musical*) engages a specifically Catholic lens, using Paul Ricœur's *Memory of Close Relations* as a theoretical grounding for my argument that theological tools can, when employed correctly, offer religious audience members the opportunity to affectively engage with queer characters in a way they might not otherwise. Chapter two extends the argument to two pieces (*Choir Boy* and *The Prom*) set in Protestant communities, examining acts of personal piety.

The second half of the dissertation considers musicals that are less obviously activist in their aims. *Spring Awakening*, *The Color Purple*, and *The Book of Mormon* are the most commercially successful and longest-running musicals featured in the dissertation, all of which are adaptations of or drew inspiration from well-known cultural artifacts. All three musicals are also set in remote times and/or places, drawing their relevance to the contemporary moment through allusion and metaphor rather than direct representation of the contemporary United States. In chapter three I ultimately argue that *The Color Purple* and *The Spring Awakening* engage their queer characters of faith to communicate positive social messages while *The Book of Mormon* does not.

Chapter four considers two musical outliers, *Head Over Heels* and *Kid Victory*. These musicals – a jukebox musical with a book written in iambic pentameter, a chamber musical in which the protagonist never sings – engage with the musical form in unconventional ways to tell unexpected and deeply queer stories with ambiguous endings. Paying special attention to the bridge failure provides between queer theory and theology, I engage theories of failure and negativity in my analysis of these musicals to illustrate their creation of a productive space of ambiguity.

Finally, the conclusion calls attention to contemporary trends and musicals in development, points out areas of further research, and notes gaps of representation available for future musical works to fill.

Chapter 1: “Closer to God”:

Liturgical Performance and Cultural Memory

When I was an undergraduate student in the Bible Belt, a Catholic friend invited me to join him for an evening Mass. I went, and while I had to take my standing, sitting, and kneeling cues from the people around me, we were both surprised to find that I knew almost all of the right words to say...courtesy of a studio cast recording that was very quickly making the rounds throughout the theatre department. When I mention that I am working on a project about queer people of faith in musical theatre, those people who are not surprised such a category exists invariably respond with “oh, like *bare!*” *Bare: a pop opera* (and, to a lesser extent, the revival production of *Bare: The Musical*) is a cult classic for a particular generation of queer theatre enthusiasts. At the time, my friend and I laughed about the irony of a gay musical helping me to better participate in someone else’s faith traditions. Now, though, it does not seem ironic at all; why should the liturgical acts in *bare* not build a bridge that goes both ways?

In this chapter, I propose that musicals depicting queer-identified Christians engaging in performances of liturgy and other public engagement with religious texts offer religious audience members the opportunity to affectively engage in acts of cultural memory along with the musical’s queer protagonists, creating space for empathy and identification to occur in a way that would not be possible through musical narrative or the performance of cultural memory alone. This tactic allows musicals to perform revisionist work that (accurately) suggests that queer people were always already part of the religious traditions from which they are often excluded. It also creates the opportunity for these audience members to perceive a potential area of connection with LGBTQ people in their lives and communities that may lead to concrete social change.

I engage *bare: a pop opera* and *Bare: The Musical* as case studies. These musicals are the only musicals in this dissertation that take place within a Catholic faith community and therefore within a religion with a clear liturgical tradition. *Bare: a pop opera* effectively engages traditions of the Church, offering a picture of a deeply faithful queer protagonist and hope for positive faith experiences and communities for young QPoF. In contrast, *Bare: The Musical* fails to engage meaningfully with the faith lives of the characters at its center. By ignoring the liturgical traditions embedded within the characters' faith system, the musical positions its characters as not only unfaithful but as incapable of productively engaging with the larger social structures and safety nets that could help them survive through adolescence gracefully.

Acts of Worship as Liturgical Practices

The life stage of adolescence is a stage of transition, marking the journey from childhood to a fully participating adult member of society. Given this, part of the task of those responsible for parenting, mentoring, or otherwise raising adolescents is giving them the cultural competencies to participate properly in the community in which they find themselves. Religion is a powerful institution of and repository for cultural memory, and memory – according to Alison Landsberg, a memory studies scholar – is an essential component of religious traditions, particularly those affiliated with Christianity (the religious system represented in the musicals in this chapter).⁷³ Places of worship and traditions of religious liturgy serve to connect parishioners to the community of believers and offer an engagement with the Biblical past via memories forged through repetition. Memory developed through liturgical engagement also, Landsberg explains, provides an opportunity for empathy with Biblical ideals and individuals.

⁷³ Allison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (Columbia University Press, 2004): 5-6.

Landsberg is referencing a cultural moment in the Middle Ages when, as Luisa Nardini points out, most engagement with history of any variety was religious in nature.⁷⁴ However, religious involvement is still an important part of membership in many contemporary communities, especially in the United States. Communal performance of liturgy and religious rituals still solidifies in-group belonging, particularly in close-knit communities with an expectation of homogenous religious practices. Such communities are those from which some Broadway tourists hail and in which, like all communities, librettos can be read, soundtracks streamed, and televised special performances watched. That is certainly the case in the communities represented in the musicals in this chapter, each of which include characters – the protagonists and/or their parents or other adult figures – who express fears that the protagonists’ desires to live authentically will result in exclusion from their communities at the life stage when they should be stepping fully into them, as doing so seems (at least initially) incompatible with a community-sanctioned performance of religiosity.

As noted previously, this fear is not entirely unfounded. Characters (and people) who fail to perform religiosity to their community's standards *do* risk exclusion.⁷⁵ Art that does not support religious views consistent with those of the community risks rejection, as well; Kathleen Brandon’s study of contemporary Christian attitudes towards theatre discovered that it is

⁷⁴ Luisa Nardini, “Liturgy as Historiography: Narrative and Evocative Values of Some Eleventh-Century Mass Propers,” in *Early Music: Context and Ideas II* (The International Conference in Musicology, Krakow, Poland, 2008), 28.

⁷⁵ Elizabeth Edman, *Queer Virtue: What LGBTQ People Know About Life and Love and How It Can Revitalize Christianity* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2016).

important to religious audience members that “the message [of a piece of theatre] reflects their understanding of truth in the world.”⁷⁶

Lucas Hilderbrand notes that cultural memory is affective and experiential in a way conventional history is not. Affective cultural memories, he suggests, offer “profound experiences of emotion, deeply felt relations and reactions that...may have lifelong effects on [an individual’s] perspectives and actions.”⁷⁷ If the performance of religious ritual is a site of cultural memory and cultural memories offer an opportunity for deep-seated connection, it seems likely that Biblical figures are not the only potentially-distant others with whom performative engagement with religious tradition offers an opportunity for empathy.

The choice to engage memory as a lens of analysis in this chapter is a political one. Violence against queer bodies is well-documented and, if not supported, certainly not surprising; roughly a third of the musicals engaged in this dissertation feature instances of their protagonists being physically attacked as a result of their sexual orientation. Thomas Dunn and Charles E. Morris both also suggest, however, *systemic* violence against queer presence in history and memory, a “mnemocide” intended to support dominant heterosexist ideologies within communities by pretending that those who might contradict them never existed within the communities in the first place.⁷⁸ At their most effective, these artists-[] are using cultural

⁷⁶ Brandon, 102.

⁷⁷ Lucas Hilderbrand, “Retroactivism,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12, no. 2 (2006): 303–17, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-12-2-303>, 306.

⁷⁸Thomas R. Dunn, *Queerly Remembered: Rhetorics for Representing the GLBTQ Past*. (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2016), 3; Charles E. Morris, *Queering Public Address: Sexualities in American Historical Discourse* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2007), 95-96.

memory as a tool to put queer people back in the communal narrative.

As Landsberg notes, engagement with religious memories through the performance of liturgy provides a connection with the Divine. It also provides a connection to the community of believers, not just the members of the church in which one is worshipping but the greater Church, the community that Dunn notes has been formed through Biblical engagement throughout the ages.⁷⁹ Liturgical traditions, David Power suggests, have “a key role in nurturing common memory.”⁸⁰ By participating in liturgical traditions, one performs one’s in-group status as a member of the religious community.

Peter Fink argues that some acts of devotion also function as liturgical acts.⁸¹ Fink explains that since liturgy is worship performed by the entire Church and it “is the whole Church that is summoned to repentance and forgiveness, and the whole Church which is called to reconciliation,” even if a penitent is alone with a priest “[t]he penitent enters into the forgiveness that has been given to the Church, and receives once again that same forgiveness which Christ has won for all.”⁸² Thus, according to Fink, the sacrament of Penance is still a communal experience in the spirit of liturgy. I hew to Alanna Vincent and David Jasper’s definition of

⁷⁹ Alana Vincent and David Jasper, *Making Memory: Jewish and Christian Explorations in Monument, Narrative, and Liturgy* (Cambridge, England: James Clark & Co., 2013): 9; Dunn, 71.

⁸⁰ David N. Power, “The Receding Sea of Catholic Faith: Collective Memory and Common Worship,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 79, no. 4 (2014): 303–26, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021140014541370>, 324.

⁸¹ Peter E. Fink, “The Sacrament of Penance: A Liturgical Event,” in *Formation for Liturgy* (The North American Academy of Liturgy Annual Meeting, New York, NY: The North American Academy of Liturgy, 2004), 1–12, <http://www.naal-liturgy.org/pav/docs/seminars/formation/fink.pdf>.

⁸² Fink, 3.

liturgy as “a type of text which describes a public performance of worship.”⁸³ Even were one to disagree with Fink’s analysis, the nature of theatrical performance – in which an actor is observed by a community of audience members and performs with a community of other performers, or at least other musicians – means that *all* worship in the world of a musical is a public performance. (As such, while I pay particular attention to the ways in which inarguably liturgical moments operate in both musicals, I also examine other moments of religious engagement.)

When queer characters participate in a Mass, sing or pray a codified devotional prayer, or participate in confession or other sacraments, they are performing their in-group status as a member of the religious community. This performance is different than a character simply verbally asserting their faith – that may well create an emotional connection with religious audience members, but the performance of the cultural memory of liturgy or engagement with other specific codified texts is, as Paul O’Donnell suggests of received religious memory, “a direct expression of the realm of the divine.”⁸⁴ By sharing the specific words and language and invocation of a higher power with audience members who share their religious identities these characters connect to audience members through an expression of faith that is not only verbal or intellectual but sensorial. It is affective in a way complementary to the affectivity inherent in musical theatre spectatorship.

⁸³ Vincent and Jasper, 9.

⁸⁴ Paul O’Donnell, “‘Place’ as the Locus of ‘Memory’: Conserving the Cultural Patrimony of the Church,” *The Australasian Catholic Record* 86, no. 4 (2009): 427.

Jeanette Rodriguez and Ted Fortier describe cultural memory as “blood calling out to blood,” “evoking recognition of truth.”⁸⁵ By allowing queer characters and audience members to share in a faith practice designed to underscore a shared religious truth claim and community, these musicals create a space for the consideration that real people like the characters belong to that community, as well. “Liturgical space,” Vincent says, “provides the community with an identity-generating narrative that may be interpreted and re-interpreted as circumstances and the needs of the community change.”⁸⁶ In failing to fully engage communal liturgical space, *Bare: The Musical* affirms that its protagonists have no hope of expecting acceptance and support within their faith communities (or the world more broadly) and provides audience members with no models for offering support. In contrast, *bare: a pop opera* leverages liturgical space to generate empathy with its protagonist and soften religious audience members to the need for change within their communities.

bare, a pop opera (2004)

Bare: a pop opera (hereafter simply referenced as *bare*, as consistent with the musical’s later branding) “has been described as a mix of *Rent* and *Dead Poets Society*, exploring sexuality, self-expression, guilt, jealousy, teen pregnancy, female body image, and religion, all overflowing with the kind of urgency and intensity that comes with being seventeen,” writes musical theatre scholar Scott Miller.⁸⁷ The musical asks big questions through the story of five

⁸⁵ Jeanette Rodriguez and Ted Fortier, *Cultural Memory: Resistance, Faith, and Identity* (University of Texas Press, 2009), 4.

⁸⁶ Vincent and Jasper, 3-4.

⁸⁷ Scott Miller, “Inside BARE by Scott Miller,” New Line Theatre, 2011, <http://www.newlinetheatre.com/barechapter.html>.

students in their senior year at St. Cecelia's Catholic boarding school. The story is centered on the school sports star and golden boy, Jason, along with his roommate (and, unbeknown to the rest of the world, very long-term boyfriend) Peter. Their lives unfold in a complex parallel to the school production of *Romeo and Juliet*, culminating in Jason's suicide near the end of the second act. Peter and Jason operate within the snug social circle of the senior class, which includes Matt (a straight-laced boy in love with Ivy), Ivy (a sexually precocious young woman who attempts to have a relationship with Jason and ends up pregnant with his child), Nadia (Jason's fat twin sister who struggles with feeling socially isolated), Lucas (the school drug dealer), and others.

The musical with book and lyrics by Jon Hartmere and music by film composer Damon Inrabartolo opened off-Broadway at the American Theatre of Actors for a run extending from April 19 to May 27, 2004, under the direction of Kristin Hangii (who also directed the initial hit Los Angeles production in 2000). It is easy to imagine *bare: a pop opera* as a descendant of *RENT*, to imagine Hartmere and Inrabartolo as college theatre students in the late 1990s hoping to bring an emo-pop idiom to musical theatre the same way *RENT* did with rock, to channel the excitement generated by a narrative of urban queerness into a queer narrative closer to home; there were, after all, only four years between *RENT*'s opening and *bare*'s Los Angeles debut.

Reviews for the off-Broadway production were, as Miller suggests reviews for most productions of *bare* tend to be, "grudgingly admiring, but decidedly mixed."⁸⁸ Critic Matt Windman wrote, "The piece is dramatically uneven, but in spite [of] its weaknesses, *Bare* [*sic*] has the remarkable power to attach an audience member's emotions by appealing to common fears through a tale of growing up in a psychologically and religiously restrictive

⁸⁸ Miller.

environment.”⁸⁹ *Bare* is frequently divisive along lines of age and taste as well as ideology; in *Off-Broadway Musicals since 1919: From Greenwich Village Follies to The Toxic Avenger*, Thomas Hischack suggests that *bare* “was dismissed as pretentious drivel by most of the critics” – Adam Feldman called it a “teenybopper tragedy” - “but...refuses to fade away and has built quite a following with young audiences and young performers.”⁹⁰

Why is *bare* so beloved of young viewers when it produces such notable ambivalence in adult critics? Rob Winert-Kendt posits that the close parallels between the writers’ personal journeys and Peter and Jason’s narrative may be responsible for “any special liberating powers for questioning teenagers” the show possesses; Hartmere and Intrabartolo began working on the show together in college as queer Catholic men (though Hartmere was closeted at the time.)⁹¹ Regardless of the reason for its appeal, *Bare*’s fan following extends beyond those who were able to see the musical’s six-week New York run. This is, in part, due to its enduring popularity with universities and community theatres bringing the material to new communities; it is also due to the online fan community around the musical, particularly on YouTube.⁹²

When *bare* was originally conceived, writes critic Raven Snook, “Hollywood had few loud and proud homosexuals, gay marriage was illegal in every state, and author-activist Dan Savage was doling out sex advice, not preaching self-love to LGBT youth.”⁹³ By 2004, life for

⁸⁹ Matt Windman, “Bare,” *Show Business Weekly*, May 26, 2004, 14.

⁹⁰ Hischak, 259-260; Adam Feldman, “Bare,” *Time Out New York*, April 29, 2004, 157.

⁹¹ Rob Weinert-Kendt, “A Musical Makes Changes as Closets Open,” *N.Y. Times*, December 18, 2012, sec. Arts and Leisure, 6.

⁹² Theatrical Rights Worldwide, “Bare: Current Productions,” Theatrical Rights Worldwide, June 25, 2019, <https://www.theatricalrights.com/show/bare/upcoming/>.

⁹³ Raven Snook, “Bare Returns,” *Time Out New York*, December 6, 2012, 75.

LGBT people in the United States had started to change, but slowly – Vermont and Massachusetts offered legal status to same-sex life partners (in the form of civil unions and marriage, respectively) and sodomy laws had just been struck down nationwide in the Supreme Court’s ruling for *Lawrence v. Texas*. In 2003, the Episcopal Church ordained V. Gene Robinson – an openly gay priest – as the bishop of the Diocese of New Hampshire, becoming the first mainstream Christian denomination to do so.⁹⁴ However, the Defense of Marriage Act was still in effect (meaning other states were free to ignore unions from Vermont and Massachusetts), Don’t Ask Don’t Tell remained in place in the military, and the party line for most Christian religious organizations was that queerness was grounds for disqualification from not only clergy but the entire faith system. It was in this context that *bare* premiered.

Bare is the musical in this dissertation that engages the rites of the church most directly, using the protagonists’ faith to both connect them to a broader religious community and to convict that community for failing the young queer people who wished to call it home. In an interview, original director Kristin Hanngi said, “‘Bare’ is about the definition of God as love, and about erasing judgment, especially when we’re young and we feel surrounded by judgment, and the only light and divinity that can be found is in love.”⁹⁵ The musical engages the Divine in a variety of ways, as nightmare and nurturer, the cause of both horror and hope.⁹⁶ It frequently employs liturgical acts as a matter of practicality – the characters are, after all, in a Catholic

⁹⁴ GSAFE Wisconsin, “A Timeline of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender History in the United States,” GSAFE: LGBT History Materials, 2008, <https://www.gsafewi.org/wp-content/uploads/US-LGBT-Timeline-UPDATED.pdf>.

⁹⁵ Weinert-Kendt, 6.

boarding school – but also to make the dramaturgical argument that God is on the protagonists’ side and that the audience should be, too.

I begin by investigating the musical’s handling of clearly liturgical acts in the form of religious ceremonies and elements of the sacrament of Penance (confession and absolution), then consider other forms of explicit connection to the Divine (prayer, apparitions) before concluding with a brief examination of characters’ strategies of resilience.

Religious Services Setting Expectations

The most obvious setting for liturgical acts is a religious service, and religious services set the tone at the beginning of both acts of the musical – a Mass opens the musical, while the second act opens with a wedding ceremony. *Bare*’s creators engage Catholic ritual and liturgy in nuanced ways that offer informed audience members additional insight into the characters through their engagement with tradition. Here, I perform a close reading of that engagement.

At the musical’s opening, Peter and Matt are acting as altar boys for a Mass celebrating the Feast of the Epiphany with Peter carrying a cross. The first words sung are part of the traditional introductory rites: “*In nomine patris / et filius / et spiritus sancti / introibo ad altare dei.*”⁹⁷ It is normal for congregants to sing an entrance chant during the opening rite, as all the

⁹⁷ In English: “In the name of the Father / the Son / and the Holy Spirit / I will go to the altar of God.” Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 1. Incidentally, the most common form of the Mass uses “fili,,” not “filius,” but it seems unlikely that this was an intentional substitution; I located enough instances of the words being interposed that it appears to be a fairly common substitution rather than an intentional statement. See, for example, the transcript of a church service at Mission of the Little Pebble, “Message 426 – 13 December 1993,” LittlePebble.org, December 13, 1993, <https://littlepebble.org/1993/12/13/message-426-13-december-1993-2/> or on an inscription in a fountain in Norway: greysman, “Baptismal Font - Church of All Saints, Church Road, Tilney All Saints, Norfolk. PE34 4SJ - Stone Church Artefacts on Waymarking.Com,” Waymarking, March 28, 2018, https://www.waymarking.com/waymarks/WMY0NG_Baptismal_Font_Church_of_All_Saints_Church_Road_Tilney_All_Saints_Norfolk_PE34_4SJ.

students sing this selection, but these particular words are usually spoken only by the priest after reaching the altar.⁹⁸ While it is possible that the creators simply wanted more voices to begin the musical, Hartmere and Intrabartolo make choices throughout the musical to democratize elements of religious rites, conferring spiritual authority on the students as well as the priest (perhaps foreshadowing the priest's ultimate role not solely as an arbiter of forgiveness but a recipient).

The Mass continues as expected, moving on to the rite of confession and zeroing in on Peter's voice offering the prayer. It is at his utterance of "And I ask the Blessed Mary ever Virgin, all the angels and saints, and you my brothers and sisters to pray for me to the Lord our God" that the Mass veers from the script, with actors who previously appeared to be artwork of saints echoing, "yes, pray for him to the Lord your God," making a personal accusation from Peter's participation in the communal rite.⁹⁹ The music is forceful and percussive, the gentle organ giving way to drums, saints singing in a pounding pop vernacular rather than the choral heights with which the Mass began – the music offers a clear snap to something new, signaling that it is no longer part of the Mass proper.

The saints (actors who will play other students for most of the musical) sing lyrics condemning Peter's queerness without naming it outright, alluding to it through his media preferences and hobbies ("loves his female singers/loves to cook").¹⁰⁰ They do *not* resort to euphemism about the effect of his sexuality, singing in unison: "Heaven severed / hell is

⁹⁸ Jerry Filteau and Mary Ann Walsh, *How to Cover the Mass: A Resource of the Office of Media Relations, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2010).

⁹⁹ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 1-2.

¹⁰⁰ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 2.

forever.”¹⁰¹ Peter’s choices, they assert, do not only endanger him but Jason as well – “he’s unsure and [Peter] can change his mind.”¹⁰² Peter’s family is also mentioned, suggesting that his parents divorced, in part, because of his sexual identity. It is an overwhelming wave of every possible negative effect of Peter’s choices – “grave mistakes,” they warn, “will take their toll.”¹⁰³ The lyrics specify that the saints are not condemning Peter for his identity alone, but for potentially attempting to live openly with it, to “give in.” “Heaven comes with discipline,” they warn.¹⁰⁴ Each time, Peter pushes back – “but it doesn’t all make sense / what I feel is real,” he argues once, then “but it doesn’t all make sense / if the love is strong.”¹⁰⁵ The saints shut down his attempt at questioning with a quick “no more dodging / God is watching / His eye is on the lowly sparrow / the road is long the path is narrow.”¹⁰⁶

Though the words have departed from the Mass, the nightmare maintains the structure of the Mass, with a layperson – Peter’s mother – offering the first reading. Claire’s reading is hurtful, an escalation from the saints simply saying that his mother is unhappy about her son’s probable orientation, but it is also exposition letting the audience know that “that poor boy” Peter is dragging down is his roommate. “[T]he two of them locked eyes and I said to myself, ‘Claire,

¹⁰¹ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 2.

¹⁰² Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 3.

¹⁰³ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 3.

¹⁰⁴ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 2.

¹⁰⁵ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 2-3.

¹⁰⁶ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 2-3.

you wanted grandchildren, and instead you're going to get ambiguous Christmas cards from South Beach.”¹⁰⁷ The idea that Peter might come out is never considered.

The Mass escalates further, with a student leading the other students in a hymn called “A Bender Among Us,” a song that uses the musical structure of a church hymn to warn about the presence of a queer person in the congregation, including holding as true harmful stereotypes about gay men being sexually insatiable and having a tendency towards pedophilia.¹⁰⁸ When the Priest asks the congregation to pass the peace, no one will pass it to Peter. When it is time for the Eucharist, the Priest will not serve him in spite of the fact that he sang the appropriate prayer of confession “Lord, I am not worthy to receive you / but only say the word and I shall be [healed].”¹⁰⁹ The congregants sing their agreement that he is unworthy, but he is not offered the opportunity to rectify that.

That opportunity is denied, it seems, because he is dead. The scene abruptly changes to a funeral Mass where it initially seems that no one can hear Peter trying to get their attention, leading him to assume the funeral is for him. This assumption is supported by the further escalation of anti-gay rhetoric, with the priest, altar boys, and male saints and students chanting “Timothy, Romans, Corinthians, Leviticus” – books of the Bible that contain verses frequently cited as scriptural support for condemning homosexuality – and female saints and students singing “hate the sinner / hate the sin,” all resolving to sing together “abomination” and

¹⁰⁷ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 3-4.

¹⁰⁸ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 4.

¹⁰⁹ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 4.

entreating, “bear the cross.”¹¹⁰ It is at that point that Peter wakes up to the perfectly normal end of a perfectly normal Mass, revealing that everything that happened before was a nightmare.

A musical’s opening number communicates important information about the world and the attitudes of a musical. “Epiphany” establishes Peter’s position in his school and religion. Peter is portrayed as an active member of the faith community, not just sitting through the service but participating in it; he continues to attempt to participate in the Mass even when it has gone completely awry, in spite of being denied the right to do so. While the text shows Peter questioning some of the church’s doctrine, he clearly is not in a position of rejecting the Church itself; on the contrary, *he* is the one attempting to maintain some sense of decorum and return to the Mass proper.

This is, I suggest, Hartmere and Intrabartolo’s first attempt to invite the audience to empathize and identify with Peter. While a large swath of the audience would likely react poorly to the homophobia on display in the section of the Mass’ interruption for its own sake, there is also likely a swath of potential audience members who would not appreciate the structure and some of the language of a Mass being appropriated for *any* purpose; organizing the opening scene in this way helps to join both audience members who find homophobia problematic and those who are displeased by the disrespect of the Mass in support of Peter. “Rich in symbolism,” Sister Mary Ann Walsh writes in her preface to media resource *How to Cover the Mass*, “the Mass provides a deeply sacred moment for those who participate in it, and even sometimes for those who merely observe it.”¹¹¹ The Mass’ interruption is denying the possibility of that moment.

¹¹⁰ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 5-6.

¹¹¹ Filteau and Walsh, V.

Walsh also writes that the “Mass is at the heart of the Catholic Church. It conveys the depth of Catholic theology...” The structure of “Epiphany” makes the argument that the “religious” acts of the condemning saints and students reflect less authentic piety than Peter’s worship. Peter is participating in a sacred rite; the saints and students are making what *sounds* like a religiously informed argument, but it certainly does not have the same gravitas as a ritual performed for hundreds of years. Furthermore, drilling down on those allusions to Catholic beliefs in the saints’ and students’ words reveals that they are sourced from some curious places.

“The road is long the path is narrow” is a clear reference to a specific Biblical scripture – Matthew 7:14, “small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”¹¹² Also in that chapter, however, are entreaties not to judge others and reassurances that those who ask questions will receive answers; using a reference to that chapter to shut down someone asking questions of the Divine is incongruous. “His eye is on the lowly sparrow” is a reference to a hymn, “His Eye Is On the Sparrow,” written by Civilla D. Martin (which is, itself, a reference to Luke 12:6-7, “Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.”)¹¹³ In the hymn, God’s watchful eye is a source of encouragement:

Why should I feel discouraged
 Why should the shadows come
 Why should my heart feel lonely
 And long for heaven and home

When Jesus is my portion
 A constant friend is he
 His eye is on the sparrow

¹¹² NIV.

¹¹³ NIV; Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 3.

And I know he watches over me.¹¹⁴

Given this, using God's gaze as a threat contradicts the hymn's intentions. While neither of these references would be likely to stand out to someone who was not a part of a Catholic or other Christian faith tradition, the inconsistency between their usage here and their original context likely would. Nothing else that the saints or students sing (aside from the names of the Bible chapters, which is a subject covered thoroughly elsewhere) is a direct reference to anything specific in the Catholic faith tradition; the works-based salvation the saints and students are entreating Peter to seek when they ask him to "dig down deep and save [his] soul" is actually in *opposition* to Catholic teaching.¹¹⁵ Even those who do not believe there is room for queerness in Catholicism would have a difficult time suggesting that the students and saints are the ones showing a closer connection to and belief in God. Given that "Epiphany" is Peter's dream, the versions of his mother, priest, and friends are not necessarily accurate; they are his family, friends, and acquaintances filtered through his fears. Peter, then, is the only character the audience truly meets in "Epiphany," and the musical does its best to make sure that every audience member has some grounds on which to root for him.

The second act opens with another religious ceremony, a wedding, in which Sister Chantelle (the school's drama teacher) is getting ready to officiate the marriage of Peter and Jason. The other students, acting as a gospel choir, join Chantelle to celebrate Peter and Jason's union as heavenly ordained:

Tanya: Jesus made the blind man see.
 Chantelle: Gave sight to you and sight to me.
 Company: Love is true!

¹¹⁴ Civilla D. Martin, "His Eye Is on the Sparrow," Hymnary.org, 1905, https://hymnary.org/text/why_should_i_feel_discouraged.

¹¹⁵ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 2.

Kyra: See in them a perfect love!
 Chantelle: The blessings are sent
 from the Heavens above.¹¹⁶

As with the opening Mass, the song makes some allusions to Biblical narratives – when Jesus healed a blind man (referenced in several places in the gospels), 1 John 4:21 (“And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister,” referenced by the lyric, “good book says to love your brother”), and Luke 6:31 (“Do to others as you would have them do to you,” quoted in the lyric, “do unto others as you would have done” – this is one of several instances where Hartmere leaves off the last word of a particularly well-known verse or rite, presumably assuming the audience can fill it in).¹¹⁷ Unlike in the opening Mass, the verses referenced here are not used inappropriately given their original contexts; the characters are collaborating in this religious act, suggesting that the community’s ability to see a queer marriage as sacred would be unusual (even in the dream context, homophobia remains a lurking danger) but God-honoring, a miraculous act of revelation.

It is probable that the audience would know from the beginning of the song that “Wedding Bells” was not really taking place. The ensemble operating outside their roles as students would be a strong clue, as would the church wedding of gay men; while Massachusetts had legalized same-sex marriage at the time of the off-Broadway production (Peter mentions that they are in Massachusetts when Chantel expresses surprise that no one objects to the ceremony), it was not legal in any other state, including New York, and the Catholic church did not actually approve same-sex marriage. Nuns also do not traditionally perform marriage ceremonies, a detail Catholic audiences would likely register even if others did not. Before the dream turns

¹¹⁶ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 74.

¹¹⁷ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 75.

nightmare, Chantelle gives it away with the lyric “Chantelle has got her own dreams” in reference to needing to speed up the dream wedding.¹¹⁸

The wedding, in accordance with the *Familiaris consortio*, is a liturgical celebration. “Inasmuch as it is a sacramental action of sanctification, the liturgical celebration of marriage . . . must be, per se, valid, worthy, and fruitful.”¹¹⁹ The ceremony does not strictly follow the script of a Catholic wedding – Jason and Peter wrote their own vows, which do not explicitly name their consent entering into the union or promise to raise any children within the Church – but it is clearly intended as a church wedding, and the order of events is largely as prescribed, with Peter, Jason, and their community participating.

The moment is interrupted when the priest comes with Ivy, the wedding dream transforming into a wedding nightmare as Jason and Ivy are married instead. Though the priest concludes the ceremony appropriately – “What God has joined, let no man tear apart. True love is forever” – Ivy and Jason do not actually say *any* vows; where Peter and Jason’s participation in the ritual consent of marriage (an important element of the conventional ceremony) is implied through their vows, no such implication is in place for Ivy and Jason.¹²⁰ Once more, homophobia has interrupted a liturgical act, and once more it is Peter who is slighted by it.

Peter follows both act-opening liturgical nightmares about his sexual orientation by turning to God in private prayer. While I explore the specifics of Peter’s prayer life later, what is

¹¹⁸ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 75.

¹¹⁹ Qtd. in Catholic Church. *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Revised in Accordance with the Official Latin Text Promulgated by Pope John Paul II*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997, 1622.

¹²⁰ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 77; “What God joins together, let no one put asunder” “The Order of Celebrating Matrimony Within Mass,” *The Order of Celebrating Matrimony: The Roman Ritual*, 2nd ed. (Strathfield, NSW: St Pauls, 2015), sec. 64.

important here is that *bare* centers Peter as its protagonist in its opening then reminds the audience both of his centrality to the narrative and his piety at the opening of the second act (after an ensemble number focused almost entirely on romantic interpersonal challenges concluded the first). Musicals conventionally center their plots around romance, and *bare* is no exception, but Peter's relationship with Jason and his relationship with the Divine are intertwined as two forces for good in his life threatened by his fears of a homophobic Church.

Confession and Connection

In *bare*, the students' relationships with the Catholic Church are clarified through the sacrament of confession.¹²¹ This offers an additional avenue for creating audience connection to queer characters in a setting in which people share intimate personal details, but it also allows for the personification of the Catholic Church in the character of the priest – “priest” is, in fact, his sole identifying characteristic, as the character is not named. It is around the sacrament of confession that *bare* centers its call to action for a more human, empathetic Church.

“Confession” begins with the other students singing outside the confessionals as they wait their turn, complaining that “it’s the sacrament of oppression / we have no need for forgiveness / because our shit’s none of his business.”¹²² It is unclear whether “he” is God or the priest – the script convention of writing lyrics in all capital letters makes it impossible to see whether the “he” would otherwise be capitalized or not – but their disinterest in the sacrament is clear even as they move through it, making their confessions by rote. Only when Peter and Matt

¹²¹ Catholic communities differ in their definitions of the names of the seven sacraments; some consider “confession” to be an acceptable way to refer to the sacrament of penance while others do not. I am using it here for the sake of clarity.

¹²² Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 36.

step into their respective booths does it seem that someone is taking things seriously as they both ask the priest what to do about their experiences at the rave:

PETER: Can the church be wrong?
 MATT: Can a sin be right?
 PETER: If something that you feel...
 MATT: Something that you saw...
 PETER AND MATT: Goes against the law,
 PETER: What do you do?
 MATT: Do you tell?
 PETER and MATT: Who do I follow?¹²³

This moment marks two important transitions. One is an evolution of character – up to this moment, Peter has not spoken with anyone except Jason about his sexual orientation or their relationship; “Epiphany” was a dream sequence. The worries that pushed Peter to nightmares and sung prayers have finally escalated enough to prompt him to seek spiritual guidance through the sacrament of confession. Once again, the musical is setting up a dichotomy in which siding with the character performing the liturgical act correctly and respecting the faith tradition also requires siding with a queer character. (At this point in the musical a convention becomes clear – proper prayer, apparently, requires a ballad, as Peter seems to pull down the tempo every time he interacts with the Divine.)

The second is that it is at this moment that the musical engages the Catholic church’s teachings in real space and time (as opposed to a dream space) through the words of the priest, who responds:

The church’s teachings
 Come from centuries of study.
 Questions of doctrine are best left
 To greater minds than yours.
 This is not to say
 The church is never wrong
 But if you hold to her creed

¹²³ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 37-38.

You will never find yourself let down.¹²⁴

Peter, Matt, and the other students worry that the priest did not “hear [their] voice,” as his response seems intentionally vague...until one considers that, while the audience immediately understands to what Peter and Matt are referring with their equally vague questions, the priest does not; he is not offering an opinion on how one should deal with sexual orientation, but with the hypothetical question of whether or not the Church ever misidentifies something as sinful.¹²⁵ His answer is in response to the question he was asked, not the subtext the informed audience can read into it.

It is important to note that the priest is not written as a villain or antagonist: he demonstrates deep care for students even as he is bound by the letter of doctrine. It is not his authority or the Church as a whole that causes the students to feel distant from him, but the impersonal nature of upholding a doctrine without space for interrogation or debate. The audience has the opportunity to see the priest in confession a second time, an occurrence near the end of the show that contrasts the first scene of confession in many ways. Jason – the other canonically queer character of faith in the musical – runs to the priest for support after he is outed to most of his classmates in a showdown with Matt. Peter’s act of confession was proactive; Jason’s is reactive. Where Peter was musing, Jason is panicking. Where Peter asked questions, Jason is making declarations – he has fought being gay. He cannot be gay. It would destroy his life. “Still [he] recall[s] / the peace that would fall / when [he] believed / [the priest] could forgive [him],” so he seeks reassurance and guidance.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 38.

¹²⁵ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 38.

¹²⁶ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 102.

At first, the priest attempts to offer them within the confines of his station: “I can’t live for you, / but know that God is with you. / Through him you will find a way,” he sings.¹²⁷ Jason asks to see the priest, to step outside the normal structure of confession, but the priest refuses, suggesting that he is restricted by the bounds of tradition – “child, if I only could.”¹²⁸ Unlike Peter’s ballad, the music is driving, the priest and Jason overlapping, a roller coaster rocketing towards the conclusion. The priest attempts to offer encouragement and advice – “things can change, I promise / you’re young, you have time on your side” – but when Jason pushes him for a firm answer to the question of whether or not his sexual orientation is “okay,” the priest warns that Jason “know[s] what [he’ll] say” before ultimately saying it:

No!
 You know in your heart
 that the teaching is clear
 Faith in the Father
 Has led your soul here.
 Bear up the cross
 Let the church be your spine.
 Don’t question too much
 And you’ll get along fine.”¹²⁹

The priest reassures Jason that nothing he could have done would be beyond forgiveness, but he is the official voice of the Catholic Church in *bare* and “the teaching is clear.”¹³⁰

Early on the priest exists in Peter’s subconscious as a symbol of the disapproval of the Church, but the musical maintains the priest as a neutral character, neither a source of

¹²⁷ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 103.

¹²⁸ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 103.

¹²⁹ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 103-104.

¹³⁰ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 104.

condemnation nor encouragement. Unlike the adults Meyer warns of who are unwilling to engage with the problems of the young people in their community, the priest wants to be accessible to students and *does* attempt to offer council, but does so at a distance; he does not push for students to self-disclose, instead advocating for them to trust the Church and suppress any questions about its workings. Treating the priest as a bad person would make it easy for those who agree with his viewpoints or otherwise identify with him to dismiss the musical's message, focusing on the sting of apparently hypocritical condemnation from a community that complains of being condemned.¹³¹

Instead, even after the priest's words play a clear role in Jason's decision to take his own life, Peter treats him compassionately. He returns to the confessional to gently confront the priest in "Absolution." The song is the musical's message to the Church, a call for empathy:

He went to you for guidance
 You hid behind a screen
 Knowing how much
 empathy might mean.
 Did you know how much he loved?
 Did you know how much he cared?
 Lost in the teachings was
 A boy so all alone and scared.
 Father we were so in love
 And that's what I find so odd.
 Our love was pure and
 Nothing else brought me closer to God.¹³²

¹³¹ I am reflecting the popular argumentative tactic in which a minority group's unfriendly tone towards oppressors is treated as equivalent with acts upholding systemic oppression on the part of majority group members; I am not suggesting that this is a true equivalence, but simply that *bare* sidesteps the opportunity for this false equivalence to be engaged.

¹³² Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 112.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church says that confession “frees [the confessor] and facilitates his reconciliation with others,” allowing him to “open...himself again to God and to the communion of the Church in order to make a new future possible.”¹³³ Peter does not actually confess or repent in “Confession” – there is, the musical suggests, nothing sinful about his feelings for Jason, and therefore nothing that needs to be confessed. Jason does not actually get around to confessing or repenting in “Cross” – he is unable to make himself say the words, and he is asking for reassurance rather than absolution. In “Absolution,” however, the priest apologizes. Peter forgives him. Repentance and forgiveness, after all, is what the sacrament of confession is about, and Peter is good at properly observing religious rituals. Together, Peter and the priest create a vision of a future of the Church that is not marred by recriminations of the past but calls for a doctrine of compassion.

Prayer, Parties, and Personal Relationships with the Divine

It is clear that Peter’s faith practice is limited to neither school-required religious services or dreamscapes; immediately following the first Mass, Peter is alone in the school halls praying the Hail Mary. It is a prayer seeking intercession and comfort; when Peter has had a frightening dream about being condemned for his sexual identity, his first step is to reach out to the Divine. The musical continues to build Peter as a character with his own active faith, a “good Cath’lic” as his boyfriend teases.¹³⁴ It also continues to put his faith and sexuality in conversation; Peter moves from his Hail Mary to singing “You and I” with Jason, the only song in the musical approaching a conventional up-tempo love song, without sensing apparent contradiction. Throughout the musical, Peter’s willingness to seek personal connection to the Divine leads to

¹³³ Catholic Church, 1455.

¹³⁴ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 8.

connections with other characters, affirming both God’s approval of Peter and the benefits of a faith system lived communally; *bare* is not suggesting that the path for QPoF is to quietly separate the two spheres of their lives, but repeatedly places value on doing the challenging work of creating spaces and relationships in which the two coexist.

When things go awry with Jason, Peter turns to prayer once more in “Role of a Lifetime,” this time in his own words – “God, I need your guidance,” he sings before describing the challenges of his own struggle with identity (now apparently settled, if not easily so) and watching his boyfriend go through the same. That is not to say that his relationship with the Divine is an entirely easy one; he describes “spending nights in lonely prayer / hoping that one day when [he] wake[s] that feeling won’t be there,” a prayer that clearly went unanswered.¹³⁵ “Role of a Lifetime” does not offer any solutions, either, but it does offer a snapshot of a character who sees God as important, worthy of repeated attempts at engagement even in seasons where the resulting engagement is unsatisfying.

While Peter is uncomfortable self-disclosing through the intermediary of the priest after the rave, he has no such qualm with speaking to God directly, as he does in “Are You There?,” another duet he shares with Matt after another party – this time, one at which Jason and Ivy, their respective love interests, seem to have found a romantic (or at least sexual) connection. (These scenes do not comment on each other quite so directly in performance as they are not directly back to back in the musical. Nonetheless, their presence suggests that clergy are not necessarily the sole point of contact for the Almighty; this distinction is subtly drawn here but will become more important as the musical continues.)

¹³⁵ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 13.

In “Are You There?,” Matt and Peter pray in separate areas of the church, asking God why “if it’s in [His] power [does he] sit idly by” while they are struggling.¹³⁶ They both align their own challenges – feeling like an outsider for Matt and worrying that intended plans will not come to fruition for Peter – with challenges faced by Christ as they ask for divine empathy. They sing in close harmony even as they do not know the other is there, aligning them with each other musically; they might seem very different at first glance, the Platonic Catholic boy and the closeted gay kid, but this is the second time they have followed the same steps concurrently, seeking divine aid for their disparate but related problems. With the alignment of Matt and Peter, the musical is asking religious audience members to take a step further – not only is Peter better at performing Catholicism than most of the rest of the (presumably) straight ensemble, but he is doing it in the same way as the kind of young man any of them would be glad to know. He, it suggests, might be the kind of young man any of them would be glad to know.

Peter comes out to Matt after the moment of connection, but Matt’s reaction is perfectly neutral; he simply wishes Peter good night and goes to bed. The reaction of the Divine is less ambiguous – Peter receives a visit from the Virgin Mary (played by the actor who plays Sister Chantelle and backed up by two angels), apparently prompted by the fact that “the love that dare not speak its name done gone ahead and spoke.”¹³⁷ She starts to quote John 8:32 (“You will know the truth and it shall set you [free],” in her translation), but stops and dismisses it as “too generic” for what Peter needs to hear.¹³⁸ What Peter needs, in her opinion, is very clear: now that

¹³⁶ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 53.

¹³⁷ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 58.

¹³⁸ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 57.

he has come out, he needs to call his mom, and she and the angels have come to tell him so in a bouncy Supremes-inspired pop/soul number.

In many ways, the Virgin Mary is the queerest character in the musical.¹³⁹ Painting the Virgin Mary as an echo of gay icon Diana Ross aligns her with the queer community, and while everyone else has largely kept the subject of queerness to whispered metaphors, she jokes about it - when she enters, Peter says “Fuck me, Matt! It’s Diana Ross!” in case the audience did not catch the connection from the music alone, earning him Mary’s snappy response “Uh, sure enough ain’t, but now I know I got the right person.”¹⁴⁰ Ross is, of course, the artist who sang the gay anthem “I’m Coming Out,” and while encounters with the divine are usually calls to explicitly religious action, the salvation to which Peter is being called seems to be in the form of openness about his sexual orientation.

The musical’s creators are walking a fine line here. As Henry Bial points out in *Playing God: The Bible on the Broadway Stage*, portraying God as an incarnate character onstage has always been a risky endeavor; it is difficult for playwrights and productions to find a portrayal that is both dramatically interesting and sufficiently reverent to avoid offending religious audience members.¹⁴¹ The journeys of Peter’s crisis of identity and crisis of faith have run in parallel throughout the musical, however, and the escalation of coming out to someone must be matched with a joint escalation in his religious experience if they are to remain intertwined; communication from the Divine is the logical result.

¹³⁹ I am using “queer” here in the broader sense; Mary is aligned with LGBT-affiliated pop culture icons and imagery, but I’m not suggesting she is LGBTQ.

¹⁴⁰ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 56.

¹⁴¹ Henry Bial, *Playing God: The Bible on the Broadway Stage* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 66.

The musical sidesteps the issue in two ways. First, there is the choice to use Mary herself. In the Catholic faith tradition, Mary is not on an equivalent level to God, but she *is* considered to be holy; she speaks with a degree of divine authority but without claim to omniscience or the ability to speak directly on behalf of God. (When Peter tries to ask “But what if God-,” Mary reassures him that he will “figure it out.”)¹⁴² Second, the musical layers the experience in plausible deniability – Peter is drunk, and the Virgin Mary looks and acts suspiciously like the nun who runs the theatre program. When he describes the experience to Jason later, he does not claim that it really happened, but rather that he “had the craziest dream, or vision, last night.”¹⁴³ This creative choice provides a buffer for those who might find a portrayal of Mary as a diva in poor taste – she is, after all, typically honored for her patience and calm acceptance of her role in the drama of Jesus’ birth – while still allowing Peter the opportunity to continue to demonstrate his faithfulness.

Whatever the actual source of the vision, Peter immediately drops to his knees upon seeing Mary (a physical expression of devotion) and displays proper reverence by being willing to do as he is told. When Jason refuses to visit Peter’s family to support him in coming out to his mother over Spring Break and breaks up with Peter, Peter still calls his mother and comes out to her; she pretends not to understand and hangs up on him. Claire’s reaction is devastating to Peter and, presumably, the audience. Rather than leaving the audience with the impression that Claire is completely unsympathetic, however, Intrabartolo and Hartmere pause the main plot of the young people to give her a song. In “Warning,” Claire mourns the plans she had for her son and worries about her ex-husband’s reaction to Peter’s sexuality. Alone in conversation with the

¹⁴² Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 61.

¹⁴³ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 65.

Divine, she expresses the empathy she did not show him – “I wish that I could hold him / God, he’s all alone and scared.”¹⁴⁴ Even for straight characters in this musical, prayer leads to prosocial interpersonal behavior or at least the desire for it; by graduation, Claire is able to comfort her son as he grieves his deceased boyfriend. Claire provides the audience both the emotional experience of a parent’s rejection and the hope that, once the initial shock is over, they can come around.

Peter’s earlier unspoken question (“But what if God-,” presumably questioning whether God loves and approves of him even though he is queer-identified) does not receive an answer until he takes the step of faith of coming out to his mother. When Peter gets an answer, it is in the form of the musical’s eleven o’clock number, a show-stopper by Sister Chantelle offering the musical’s argument for God’s views of queer people of faith. After Peter performs Juliet’s part at rehearsal with Jason when Juliet does not show up, Sister Chantelle pulls Peter aside to ask why he has been upset lately. He dismisses her, but she says, “Peter, honey, I think I’ve been around enough priests to understand you loud, proud, and clear,” alluding to the stereotype of priests as taking orders to flee their homosexuality.¹⁴⁵ She goes on to reassure Peter that “God don’t make no trash” (the title and thesis of the gospel song), expanding:

Boy, you better believe it
That God is on your side
He’ll be your strength
Your rock, your truth,
Your everlasting guide.

...

Boy, you better believe it
You’re who you need to be!
‘Cuz love is love!
Love is truth!

¹⁴⁴ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 87.

¹⁴⁵ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 91.

Love is God!
And love will set you free!”¹⁴⁶

Sister Chantel’s assertion that “God is love” picks up the words and argument of an earlier verse in one of the Biblical chapters quoted during the wedding, 1 John 4:8, “Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.” The message of the song is that straight religious people should not judge LGBT people because God created humans in wonderful diversity on purpose. “God’s got your back,” she tells Peter, “and so do I.”¹⁴⁷ While the song only includes scriptural allusions and is not part of a specific communal act of worship, the music is gospel, a style that, while not prevalent in Catholic celebrations, reads to most as religious music; it sounds like a song that could be on certain kinds of Christian radio. At the end, there is a coda that shifts into something closer to a soft ballad (Peter’s music of religious revelations) as Sister Chantel tells Peter “If you hide from yourself / be someone else for someone else’s sake / that would be the greatest mistake.”¹⁴⁸

Sister Chantel – a representative of a version of the Catholic Church, though not positioned as representative of the default position of the contemporary Church in the way the priest is – affirms Peter’s instinct to reach out to the Divine on his own, even if the mediated connection to the Divine offered by the Church suggests that his sexuality makes him less worthy of doing so. She also underscores that vulnerability around both his spirituality and sexuality create *more* opportunities for Peter to forge deep, meaningful social bonds, not fewer. This is an important message for QPoF in the audience struggling with bifurcated social

¹⁴⁶ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 91-92.

¹⁴⁷ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 92.

¹⁴⁸ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 93.

identities: they can and should expect to find communities who accept *all* of who they are. The next time Jason asks Peter to deny his truth, Peter refuses; he has found his peace.

It is worth noting that Sister Chantel is an African American woman while Peter, Jason, the priest, and many of the students (with some specific exceptions) are conventionally cast as white. While the gospel Sister Chantel sings offers a personable counterpoint to the legalism of the Church, it is also music racially coded as African American. Sister Chantel's statement that "if you're wondering why I'm a fan / it's cuz there's a black woman / inside the soul of every gay man" is problematic coming from an all-white writing team.¹⁴⁹ Rather than being intentional about prioritizing racially diverse casting for Peter and Jason or using the opportunity to engage in a conversation about the similar and dissimilar experiences of people belonging to different minority identity groups, *bare* explicitly affirms the phenomenon of white gay men appropriating black culture, particularly the culture of black women. Sister Chantel's clear affection *and* tough-love setting of explicit boundaries for the young people in her community is admirable, but the writers' decision to create a narrative in which a woman of color performs emotional labor for the good of white boys is questionable.

Developing faith communities where QPoF can live authentically relies not only on QPoF but religious straight and cis people as well. Claire's and Sister Chantelle's responses offer two ways of engaging, the priest offers a third, and the presumed negative reaction of Jason's father (Jason suggests that "maybe my dad will just beat the shit out of me and disown me" rather than "ask Notre Dame for a leave of absence while I deal with a sexual identity crisis") factors heavily into the dissolution of Jason and Peter's relationship.¹⁵⁰ It does not seem

¹⁴⁹ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 92.

¹⁵⁰ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 65.

accidental that many of the adult relationships have their most significant stage time near characters' interactions with the Heavenly Father (or the Mother of God). In offering a variety of adult reactions to the queer adolescents in *bare*, the musical offers a spectrum of possibility, both harrowing and hopeful. Critic David Rosenberg praises the fact that *bare* "is filled with idealism [and] eschews outright villainy."¹⁵¹ By refusing to paint any of the onstage adults as pure antagonists and instead humanizing them (though not justifying their missteps), the musical not only offers opportunities for queer young people to hope for their own encouraging mentors or for the positive responses of previously unhappy adults but offers grace to adults who might see themselves in one of the musical's elders.

The variety of adult responses to Peter and Jason's identity also allows the musical to sidestep a narrative threat that Gilad Padva warns against in media aimed at queer young people: positioning coming out as an obligation and source of freedom without properly acknowledging potential difficulties and dangers people who come out face.¹⁵² Even so, *bare*'s narrative firmly suggests that while young QPoF can and should be hopeful for eventual acceptance from the adults in their life, acceptance from the Divine is available immediately.

Relationships and Resilience

Throughout the musical, it is Peter with whom the audience has been invited to identify – he is both clearly a person of faith and clearly self-identifies as gay, making him palatable and understandable to a wide cross-section of potential audience members. Peter stayed in conversation with the Divine and trusted that answers would come, ultimately receiving answers from someone in a position of some religious authority; his faithfulness was rewarded. Jason, in

¹⁵¹ David A. Rosenberg, "Bare," *Backstage*, May 21, 2004, 56.

¹⁵² Padva, 357-358.

contrast, has relied solely on his own ability to attempt to manufacture a neatly partitioned life, not seeking help from anyone but instead propelling himself forward. This is partly simply a personality difference between the boys and a difference in faith, but also reflects different life circumstances – while Peter knows he has already earned his father’s disapproval, Jason fears the same fate. Though Peter and Jason are both queer men in a theoretically unaccepting community (no one says anything homophobic or seems to express a problem with Peter and Jason’s relationship once it is revealed, aside from the student who is upset because he was in love with the girl with whom Jason was intimate, so it is unclear whether the other students would actually have rejected the pair for being out), the pressures of their sexuality have very different effects on them. Peter is drawn to be more sure of himself; Jason kills himself. One reason for this difference is the way the boys display resilience.

While Jason is written to immediately appear as someone both physically and socially strong (he is a sports star and generally popular), Peter scores better on Craig, et al.’s markers of resilience: “coping through escapism; feeling stronger; fighting back; and finding and fostering community.”¹⁵³ Both boys cope through escapism to some degree – they literally escape to a rave together, and once there Jason escapes from the usual social landscape further by using ecstasy – but within the confines of the school, it is Peter who is able to engage in imaginative escapism in a way that cultivates his ability to imagine a better future. Peter repeatedly invites Jason to join him in imagining a future together in a post-graduate world “where [their relationship] won’t be a problem” and is repeatedly rebuffed.¹⁵⁴ In fact, Jason actively calls out the escapism he derides as fantasy when he breaks up with Peter:

¹⁵³ Craig, et al.

¹⁵⁴ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 66.

It's time to wake up, Peter.
 Put away the fairy tales.
 The clock is striking midnight can't you hear?
 Not all takes have happy endings.
 We can't keep pretending
 'Cuz there's no such thing as heroes who are queer.¹⁵⁵

Peter's ability to imagine a different world builds his resilience, allowing him to grow into the other modes of resilience. He feels stronger as he is bolstered by repeated moments of social connection: coming out to Matt, being encouraged by Mary, and finally getting a pep talk from Sister Chantelle. Peter's confidence grows slowly until he is able to meaningfully fight back, first with Jason – when Jason attempts to deny Matt's accusations that he and Peter were romantically involved, Peter contradicts him and publicly admits to their relationship – and later with the priest, scolding him for his decision not to support Jason.

Jason does not find his way to escapism until near the end of the musical when he comes to Peter and begs him to run away with him. By that point, Peter has moved beyond that particular tool and refuses – “You can't hide anymore. / I can't hide anymore. / I don't want to.”¹⁵⁶ There is no queer community to find and foster within the school walls, but Peter is looking forward to the future past graduation and invites Jason to do the same. (“It's not goodbye,” he reassures.)¹⁵⁷ Jason's isolation and fear of being found out protected him from possible social consequences, but it also prevented him from engaging in coping mechanisms that might have equipped him to face the consequences of being outed more effectively.

¹⁵⁵ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 67.

¹⁵⁶ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 106.

¹⁵⁷ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 109.

Writing about *bare*, musical theatre scholar Scott Miller says, “This is a story about [young people] finally feeling like they have found their own voice and have something of value to say, but no one is listening. The whole plot hinges on the idea of communicating or failing to, of being heard or being silenced.”¹⁵⁸ Isolation, suggests both *bare* and research about LGBTQ health, is dangerous.¹⁵⁹

The St. Cecelia’s of the final scene and song – “No Voice,” which was foreshadowed in Peter’s nightmare at the beginning of the musical – is sadder, more somber, but it is also more accepting. Nadia reveals that she always suspected the truth about her brother; Peter’s mom hugs him. It is still a Catholic institution, and the cast’s voices reach up in prayer. The musical does not end with the words of formal, scripted liturgy, but it does end during a Mass, and the full company performs the words to a hymn written for the musical in the style of real hymns, seeking God’s blessing for hope for the future and a more whole community of faith. That seems to be the musical’s wish, and it performs that hopeful work through the use of liturgy.

The end of the musical circles back to the beginning, making sense of Peter’s vision – a funeral, but not his own. The repetition of the lyric “bear the cross,” chanted at him by the other students-as-saints, also comes into new focus.¹⁶⁰ It is a reference to Matthew 16:24, a passage suggesting that self-denial and seeking Christlike qualities are an important part of a Christian life (“Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and

¹⁵⁸ Miller, “Inside BARE by Scott Miller.”

¹⁵⁹ Dahl.

¹⁶⁰ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 6.

take up his cross and follow me”).¹⁶¹ While the meaning in the introduction appears to be that Peter needs to give up his relationship with Jason, Peter is associated with Messianic language and imagery throughout the musical. *Bare* opens with Peter literally carrying a cross, and his mother references the lyrics of “Silent Night” (a Christmas song about the birth of Jesus) when she sings about his coming out: “Could this really be my child / my firstborn, my child? / Who lay in his cradle/so tender and mild?”¹⁶² Like Jesus, Peter is beloved of Mary.

This, combined with Peter’s vexation at the prospect of public censure from the very beginning of the musical, relative lack of social support, and the fact that he plays Mercutio (who is the first significant character to die in *Romeo and Juliet*), suggests that it will be *Peter* who dies by the musical’s end. There is little doubt that someone will die: the *Romeo and Juliet* production running in parallel to the other action of the story suggests as much but, more to the point, musical theatre history has trained audiences to expect it. In *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity*, Raymond Knapp points out that characters with alternative sexualities often die at the end of the works in which they appear, either to punish them for disrupting the status quo, to underscore the world as a place in which they could not live (usually with the stated or implied suggestion that the world needs to change), or with “a sense of redemptive Christian sacrifice or saintly martyrdom, especially when such characters otherwise occupy the moral center of their narratives, so that they die, as did Christ, for the sins of others.”¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ Matthew 16:24, NIV.

¹⁶² Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 87.

¹⁶³ Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity* (Princeton University Press, 2006): 207.

Musical theatre history has taught us to expect that Peter's death might spur his (more conventionally masculine) partner on to self-discovery and action or, in a musical less consistently clear about where its social politics lie, give Jason the excuse he needs to return to a life of apparent heterosexuality. That is not what happens – *Jason* dies. Jason's death, however, does not neatly fit into any of these categories. Jason is not being punished for disrupting the status quo; he did not. He clung to the status quo so fiercely that it destroyed him. Still, the world of *bare* is not an unlivable place for queer teens as Peter continues living in it, and Jason is not painted as a particularly ethical character to be sacrificed for others. Jason's death is certainly tragic on its own, but it is not Jason with whom the musical crafts the audience's sympathies to lie.

In his 2004 volume, *Memory, History, and Forgetting*, Paul Ricoeur advances the theory of a memory of close relations, forming a kind of memory that operates as a bridge between personal and cultural memory, creating – as Oona Frawley and Katherine O'Callaghan describe – “an in-between mnemonic sphere that allows [one] to partake of the point of view of the Other.”¹⁶⁴ “Does there not exist,” Ricoeur posits,

an intermediate level of reference between the poles of individual memory and collective memory, where concrete exchanges operate between the living memory of individual persons and the public memory of the communities to which we belong? This is the level of our close relations [...] people who count for us and for whom we count... [T]hese close relations occupy the middle-ground between the self and the ‘they...’ Close relations are others as fellow beings, privileged others.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ Oona Frawley and Katherine O'Callaghan, *Memory Ireland Volume 4: James Joyce and Cultural Memory*, Irish Studies (Syracuse University Press, 2014): 48.

¹⁶⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004): 131-132.

A piece of art might do well to find a way to invoke these memories of close relations, then, to equip audience members to view the characters onstage as like them in a way that confirms that they “count” – or, in the words of Doris Bachmann-Medick and Frederick Tygstrup, that makes them “grievable” in times of suffering.¹⁶⁶ This privileging of others, this grievability, this closeness lasts beyond a single theatrical encounter, though it is the affective nature of this theatrical encounter that makes them possible. Dunn suggests that “through 'affective intensities' ... directed at certain individuals or subjects, people can come to feel a sense of belonging with them and others. Within this affective attachment, memories activate a connection that helps ensure a particular kind of durability.”¹⁶⁷ That is to say, in-the-moment feelings can create an initial connection; memory underscores it to make it something that can last.

Bare devotes significant space to crafting Peter as a character with whom both queer and religious audience members (and, of course, those who are both) can identify, can find grievable. To kill that character, however, releases the audience from any obligation they might feel to him and those like him – while his pain might be deeply felt, the dead are beyond assistance, and certainly do not make demands. Jason is a warning that actions and cultures both have consequences, but his anguish died with him; it is Peter who is left mourning, with whom the audience is primed to grieve. It is Peter who retains his association with the Messiah, offering radical conviction and radical forgiveness to the priest who failed Jason and, perhaps, by extension, to those who identify with the priest – *go now and sin no more*. It is Peter who is left

¹⁶⁶ Doris Bachmann-Medick and Frederik Tygstrup, *Structures of Feeling: Affectivity and the Study of Culture* (Berlin/Boston, GERMANY: De Gruyter, 2015), 9.

¹⁶⁷ Dunn, 69.

behind to make clear that the problem was not the way Jason loved, but that those who loved Jason failed him (“it’s so hard to find your way / when you have no voice to guide you on”).¹⁶⁸

Bare is free of villains, but it is full of victims of a social structure that discourages open communication of struggles. The musical reflects both deep respect for faith and a keen awareness that the Church is full of fallible people interpreting laws that do not always offer immediately visible opportunities for empathy. It is Peter who moves forward towards a better world and invites – demands – that the audience joins him if they do not want the blood of young QPoF on their hands.

In the years between 2004 and 2012, *bare* enjoyed many regional, educational, and community theatre productions, but its largest increase in attention came with the 2007 release of a studio cast recording. The three-disc set – including the two-CD soundtrack and a DVD of a documentary about *bare*, *Navigate this Maze* – offered the experience of a concept album; since the show was virtually sung-through and spoken dialogue is written into the music, listeners could experience the full story of the musical without seeing it. The next opportunity to see *bare* in a Great White Way-adjacent production would not come until a 2012 off-Broadway revival.¹⁶⁹

Bare: The Musical (2012)

Bare: The Musical was a thorough retooling of the original performed by lyricist/librettist Jon Hartmere and composer Lynne Shankel, who added new music and edited the old. (Original composer Damon Intrabartolo was not affiliated with the project.) The revival ran at New World Stages from December 9, 2012 to February 3, 2013, with an additional benefit run in June 2013.

¹⁶⁸ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 112; 114.

¹⁶⁹ While the production was technically considered a revival, very little of the original source material remained untouched; nearly every song that remained from the original *bare* had at least some lyrical adjustments and most were extensively lyrically – if not musically – revised.

Director Stafford Arima was also intimately involved with the process of updating the musical for 2012, adjusting to a world with widespread cell phones, internet access, and different cultural expectations for LGBTQ people.¹⁷⁰ Queer rights had continued to slowly move forward in the years between the original production and revival: in 2009 the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act (which President Barack Obama explained as being intended to "help protect our citizens from violence based on what they look like, who they love, how they pray") was signed into law, gender identity was added as a protected category for equal opportunity hiring in federal job postings in 2010, and Don't Ask Don't Tell was repealed in 2011.¹⁷¹

Marriage equality was a hot topic of national conversation and legislation, some of which was encouraging to queer citizens: eight states (Massachusetts, Connecticut, Iowa, New Hampshire, Vermont, New York, Maine, Maryland, Washington) had legalized same-sex marriage since 2004, President Barack Obama became the first sitting US President to openly support same-sex marriage, and significant portions of the Defense of Marriage Act were repealed, allowing couples who had been married in one state to retain more of the benefits of marriage if their home state did not recognize marriage equality. No longer was the marriage of two men an event so incongruous with reality that it necessitated a dream sequence.

2012 offered queer teens – even queer teens in conservative communities – more tools than ever for learning about other people who shared their identities, many of which could be accessed privately through the private internet connection in their pockets. (The smartphone in

¹⁷⁰ Erik Haagensen, "Well-Intentioned 'Bare' Traffics in Stereotypes and Clichés," *Backstage.com*, December 9, 2012.

¹⁷¹ CNN Staff, "Obama Signs Hate Crimes Bill into Law," CNN.com, October 28, 2009, <http://www.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/10/28/hate.crimes/>.

every student's pocket becomes an important plot point at the end of *Bare: The Musical*, as the entire school is able to simultaneously receive evidence of Peter and Jason kissing.) The It Gets Better Project was fully in motion and the Trevor Project (a resource for LGBTQ young people considering suicide) was in its fourteenth year of operation, suggesting a culture with a deeper awareness of the prevalence of LGBTQ young people as well as the challenge and importance of helping them survive adolescence.

The march forward, however, was not linear; in the years since *bare*'s off-Broadway premiere, sixteen states had voted to explicitly ban same-sex marriage in their state constitutions (only fourteen states had voted to do so in 2004; interestingly, the first state to constitutionally ban same-sex marriage, Alaska, likely did so when *bare* was first being written, in 1998). The Catholic Church also further clarified its stance against same-sex marriage; in his book, *Memory and Identity: Conversations at the Dawn of a Millennium*, then-sitting Pope John Paul II wrote that the conceptualization of marriage equality as a right for which people were petitioning the government was "not perhaps part of a new ideology of evil, perhaps more insidious and hidden [than the ideologies of evil in WWII Germany], which attempts to pit human rights against the family and against man."¹⁷² More public support for queerness made space for a reactionary public censure of LGBTQ identities.

In this version of the musical, the boys meet as seniors at St. Cecelia's when Jason (a sports star) sticks his head in Peter's room on Ash Wednesday to ask him for help taking a picture of himself for an assignment as Peter is nerdy and therefore good at school. They steal away to Jason's parents' lake house over President's Day weekend and spend the holiday in bed

¹⁷² Pope John Paul II, *Memory and Identity: Conversations at the Dawn of a Millennium* (New York: Rizzoli, 2005), 11.

together before returning to school. Once back at St. Cecelia's, they must navigate the realities of a secret same-sex relationship in a homophobic institution where the boys run in different circles. The athletes like Jason bully less popular boys (like the Jewish Alan), while Peter prefers to spend time with girls like the chronically naïve Diane. Jason's sister, Nadia, is a no-longer-plus-size gothic drug dealer, an "angry outcast" who is in love with the "emo puppy dog" Matt...who is, in turn, seeing the "slutty new girl," Ivy.¹⁷³

Nadia helpfully lays out the social terrain, each character fitting into a prescribed high school stereotype so neatly that it prompted one reviewer to say that watching *Bare: The Musical* was "akin to watching a particularly sappy and extra-long episode of 'Glee.'" ¹⁷⁴ *Daily Variety Gotham's* critic Randy Gener said the revised *Bare* was "funnier, sexier, and more infectiously satisfying than the original," but he seems virtually alone in that opinion.¹⁷⁵ In the years between the first and second off-Broadway productions, musical and media representations of adolescent sexuality exploded, most notably with the television show "Glee" and the musical *Spring Awakening* (to both of which critics frequently compared this production of *Bare*.)¹⁷⁶ Although *Bare's* "Glee-ification" transformed the original messy ensemble into tidy social categories and replaced the relentlessly earnest Peter with a snarkier, savvier, queerer version, it seems that the

¹⁷³ Special_Effect, "Bare: The Musical (Off-Broadway Revival) 2012/12/19," YouTube video, 2:02:57, April 1, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oNmG871x1Gs.eo>

¹⁷⁴ David Rooney, "Ill-Fated Gay Love and Hormonal Tempests on a School Stage," *N.Y. Times*, December 12, 2012, C2.

¹⁷⁵ Randy Gener, "Off B'Way Review Bare," *Daily Variety Gotham*, December 12, 2012, 10.

¹⁷⁶ Weinert-Kendt; Joe Dziemianowicz, "Musical of Gay Teens Is Thread-'Bare'," *Daily News N.Y.*, December 11, 2012, 50; Rooney, "Ill-Fated"; Frank Scheck, "'Romeo' Musical Poisonous," *New York Post*, December 11, 2012; Matt Windman, "We Can't Bare this Musical," *am New York*, December 11, 2012, 14; Gener.

revival did not capture the adolescent experience of its moment in the same way “Glee” or the original did. Critic Joe Dziemianowicz reflected, “It seems more than ever stuck in a time warp. The kids on stage may carry iPhones, but the psychology seems rooted in another decade...”¹⁷⁷ The general consensus of reviewers is that *Bare: The Musical* produced away whatever authenticity or charm prompted the cult following of *bare: a pop opera*.

Except for instances where calling attention to adaptive changes is useful, I attempt to consider *Bare: The Musical* as a discrete production as much as possible rather than solely as a revival; after all, it is highly probable that not everyone who was in the audience for the 2012 revival (or enjoyed the new music added to the production in the form of Lynne Shankel’s CD, “Bare Naked”) was familiar with the original production. Comparison is generally unfavorable to the revival, particularly in its handling of faith; *Bare: The Musical* engages some liturgical acts and other acts of piety as plot devices, but does not engage in the same apologetic mission as its predecessor or handle its religious material with the same care. As a result, *Bare* not only fails to offer meaningful points of connection to straight and cis religious audience members but risks offering offense in its casual devaluation of faith.

More than failing to advocate for QPoF to pursue healthy relationships with their faith systems and religious communities, however, *Bare: The Musical* fails to advocate for healthy relationships more broadly, romanticizing not only the tragedy of Peter and Jason’s social positions but also their abusive romantic relationship. In failing to perform the dramaturgical labor to ensure that the obvious given circumstances of the show – that Peter and Jason are star-crossed lovers, that the Church is a significant force in their lives – are supported by narrative

¹⁷⁷ Dziemianowicz, 50.

actions, *Bare: The Musical*'s creative team has created a dangerous, hopeless narrative masquerading as a truth-telling teen musical.

I outline the way the musical engages various liturgical and communal elements of faith and personal devotion before examining the dynamics of Peter and Jason's relationship in its social context. Finally, I highlight an intersection between these dangerous interpersonal dynamics and the musical's handling of faith before concluding.

Lacking Liturgy

Bare: The Musical does not open with a Mass, but with a monologue – Peter is addressing the audience since he “was asked to say a few words.”¹⁷⁸ As with *bare*, the opening scene is foreshadowing the ceremony at the end, in this case Jason's memorial service (as opposed to a graduation that has been turned into a memorial service via circumstance). Peter offers the information that “it began on Ash Wednesday” (“it” being his and Jason's relationship), then the musical immediately transforms into the Ash Wednesday Mass, the beginning of the Lenten season.¹⁷⁹

Beginning *Bare: The Musical* at this moment in the liturgical calendar does a few different things. First, it truncates the timeline of the narrative – the Feast of the Epiphany and Ash Wednesday are between four and nine weeks apart depending on when Easter falls in a given year. (The Feast of the Epiphany is January 6; Ash Wednesday is the Wednesday before Easter Sunday, which moves each year.) This means that the plot events happening in the context of the musical happen faster. Additionally, there are more of them – *Bare* covers a full relationship from first contact to ending in 3-4 months rather than focusing on the last five

¹⁷⁸ Special_Effect.

¹⁷⁹ Special_Effect.

months of a years-long relationship. Second, while the priests in both versions position the holiday in relation to a journey, those journeys are very tonally different. The Feast of the Epiphany is a celebration for a journey's joyous conclusion, positioned in parallel to the joy the seniors must be feeling coming into the final semester of their education. Ash Wednesday, in contrast, is a day of grief and repentance marking the transition between Ordinary Time and Lent. Father Mike (the priest) sets up expectations that this season will be a difficult one: "Symbolically, this is a trip into the desert – into and hopefully through the trials we find there. In that sense, it's not unlike high school, is it? This extra-ordinary time is an opportunity to find out what you're made of. Who you are, and what you want to be."¹⁸⁰

This message clearly sets up the events of the musical, in which Jason discovers who he is and what he wants to be. Crafting this homily for Ash Wednesday also, however, takes a very particular point of view towards that day, one that removes the potential for the Church to be a place to do any of that work of self-discovery or to be a source of hope. Ash Wednesday *is* a somber occasion, but Father Mike's message suggests that it is the beginning of a solitary and treacherous journey (as, traditionally, the desert is a place of solitary temptation). Many would suggest that Lent is a special time of unity, not of being confronted with unexpected challenges but actively seeking opportunities for change as a community; Richard Sklba writes that part of the joy of Lent and Ash Wednesday specifically is affirming "membership in a whole people who all together promise to be different by Easter."¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ Special_Effect.

¹⁸¹ Richard J. Sklba, "Clean up after Yourself This Lent. (Significance of Lenten Rituals)(Includes Survey Results) (Reader Survey) (Cover Story)," *U.S. Catholic* 60, no. 2 (1995), 6.

Neither Peter nor Jason participate in any liturgical acts associated with the Mass in any particular way; when the rest of the students break away from the Mass to sing, Peter and Jason join them. The song is not only *not* a liturgical act, but positions religion as part of the students' problems: "All the rules I want to break and all the plans I want to make, I'm still a million miles from heaven. Clouding up my vision I am drowning in religion and I'm still a million miles from heaven."¹⁸² They express experiencing a distance from the Divine – "Without you I am screaming can you hear me are you even there? What does it matter?"¹⁸³ The song establishes general discontent but does not deepen characterization for individual students or set up any future specific conflict. It also does not specifically reference any well-known religious texts or songs, devaluing faith as a source of meaning in students' lives aside from the oppression it symbolizes.

Diffuse Divinity

Bare: The Musical contains many plot events, dialogue, and lyrical moments that seem to suggest religiosity, but fail to do so meaningfully under closer examination. Throughout the musical, students frequently sing about the thoughts and feelings of a generic "you." In *bare: a pop opera*, an unassigned "you" when a character is alone onstage nearly always indicates that the character is speaking to the Divine, but the "you" of *Bare: The Musical* frequently seems to

¹⁸² Jon Hartmere, Damon Intrabartolo, and Lynne Shankel "A Million Miles from Heaven, *Bare: The Musical*" (unpublished piano vocal book, November 20 2012), 3.

¹⁸³ Hartmere, Intrabartolo, and Shankel, "A Million Miles from Heaven," 6-7. I am analyzing this as being an address to the Divine because of its placement during Mass and the context about being "a million miles from heaven," but *Bare* is complicated in its use of second person. In *bare*, a generic "you" almost always refers to God or some other facet of the Divine; in *Bare*, that address varies, and is open to much broader interpretation. For example, earlier in this song the boys sing "I want your heart to break" after the girls sing that they "want to bleed for love," suggesting that the "you" at that moment is a hypothetical romantic partner.

be either another student or the student body more generally rather than any celestial being. In “You Don’t Know,” for example, Nadia seems to address Matt (with whom she just had a conversation) and Ivy addresses her peers in general (all of whom are sharing the rumor that she left her last school after sleeping with a teacher) when they sing “I don’t know what I need. So how would you know what I need? Cuz you don’t know anything about me, and you don’t know why I play a part.”¹⁸⁴ It does not seem that the idea of seeking divine guidance is part of the culture of the school, even as something to make fun of or reject. (The unassigned “you” returns in one of the “Million Miles from Heaven” reprises: “If you could read my mind...And if I thought you’d hear me...If you could see inside...If I thought you had the answers...But I’m left holding only questions.”¹⁸⁵ Even if one were to choose to interpret “you” as referring to God, this is not a musical that positions the Divine as a source of comfort at any point.)

The students of the school are not equally brushed with the same quasi-mandatory-Catholic faith systems. Alan, in fact, is Jewish. Though this could have been an interesting opportunity for interfaith exploration, it is mostly exploited as a source of humor:

Alan: I love theatre, it’s in my blood!

Ivy: Are your parents actors?

Alan: No, but we *are* Jewish!¹⁸⁶

Rather than being depicted as maintaining his own faith tradition, Alan inexplicably attends confession along with the other Catholic teenagers (he sneaks bacon). This devalues both the significance of the sacrament and the importance of his own faith tradition as someone from a Jewish family that is sufficiently observant to observe dietary restrictions.

¹⁸⁴ Hartmere, Intrabartolo, and Shankel, “You Don’t Know,” 2.

¹⁸⁵ Hartmere, Intrabartolo, and Shankel, “A Million Miles from Heaven (Reprise 2),” 1-3.

¹⁸⁶ Special_Effect.

Like Alan's Jewishness, most connections to sacred texts in dialogue seem to exist to offer a reminder that St. Cecelia's is religiously based but do not reckon meaningfully with the religion itself, such as when Father Mike scolds Nadia for making fun of a peer's self-portrait by paraphrasing Matthew 7:3: "Nadia, why do you look at the speck of dust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own?"¹⁸⁷ There is nothing necessarily *wrong* with this usage, but given that he is neither implying that there is something wrong with her self-portrait that needs to be addressed or inviting her to correct some personal challenge to better offer feedback to others – the goal of the verse in context – it reads as if the Biblical language was used simply to affirm the religiosity of the character rather than because that verse actually offered meaningful counsel in the situation.

Confession and Connection

In *Bare: The Musical*, confession offers both students and the audience the chance to connect with the priest, not as a generic embodiment of the church but as the very narratively specific Father Mike. The sacrament of confession first occurs at the opening of act two, with "Confession." The lyrics in this "Confession" are more pointedly anti-religious, with the ensemble (including Peter) singing "What kind of mind control is this? Our shit's none of his business."¹⁸⁸ The priest offers a hopeful message – "Peace is yours if you embrace the gift that God is giving. They say the unexamined life is one that's not worth living. This is a sacred space. There is a healing grace." – but his following line, "Is anybody listening?" suggests a group context, which is not how the sacrament of confession usually works.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁷ Special_Effect.

¹⁸⁸ Hartmere, Intrabartolo, and Shankel, "Confession," 5.

¹⁸⁹ Hartmere, Intrabartolo, and Shankel, "Confession," 3-4.

Though Peter participates in this clearly anti-religious (or at least anti-confession) rhetoric, he meets alone with Father Mike to confess. It is unclear whether Peter tells Father Mike about him and Jason at that time – after going through a version of the beginning of confession (he does not begin with the sign of the cross or the length of time since his last confession, as is standard, but it is clear what he is doing), Peter says “I don’t know where to start,” Father Mike says “yes, you do,” and the musical enters a flashback to the day when Peter and Jason first met. Since the narrative action never returns to the confessional, there is no way to know what Peter told the priest or to know how the priest’s response affected him. In this musical, the Church is a potentially oppressive force, but it is mostly a plot device; confession is a handy reason to initiate a flashback sequence. This could be off-putting to audience members for whom the sacrament of confession is a valuable part of their religious practices, as could Jason’s refusal to attend confession when the other athletes leave to go.

Jason *does* attend confession later, not just as a school-required event, but with the intention of seeking forgiveness for his sin of queerness (in prayer after being outed to the school he describes himself as “standing scared outside a cold church, soul search, seeking some redemption from a God who loves me.”)¹⁹⁰ The sacrament, however, does not offer comfort or a feeling of redemption. Father Mike’s feedback aligns with the Catholic best practices for pastoring gay parishioners, which dictates that “the intrinsic dignity of each person must always be respected in word, in action and in law” and that violence against them should be condemned

¹⁹⁰ Hartmere, Intrabartolo, and Shankel, "Once Upon a Time," 2.

within both the Church and world at large.¹⁹¹ Father Mike reminds Jason of his intrinsic worth, putting special emphasis on the fact that “God *is* with you, through him you will find a way” – not just a platitude, but a reassurance that Jason is not alone or abandoned in his struggle.¹⁹²

Father Mike is strongly implied to be gay. He discloses that he “was an actor, once upon a time” after strangely remarking on how much Jason and Ivy look like a couple.¹⁹³ (Being an actor is not, of course, an indicator of homosexuality, but there is certainly an association between queerness and the theatre, especially when the play is positioned as an excuse for Peter and Jason to spend time together.) He immediately picks up on Peter and Jason’s chemistry in the *Romeo and Juliet* rehearsal (it is for that, not Jason pushing Peter, that he scolds Sister Joan later) and knows what Jason is struggling with when he comes to confession before Jason actually says it. His language in “Cross” suggests a connection to his advice borne of more than only pastoral concern: “You’re just a child and things can change, I promise. You’re young, you have time on your side. Tell yourself, ‘this won’t define me.’ Keep your mind on other matters. Pray for courage...”¹⁹⁴ His encouragement is not around having hope for a Church that will be affirming (or for a fulfilling faith life outside the formal Church), but that Jason will learn to suppress his sexuality and live within the standards of the Church. God can and will forgive

¹⁹¹ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons,” Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, October 1, 1986, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19861001_homosexual-persons_en.html.

¹⁹² Hartmere, Intrabartolo, and Shankel, “Cross,” 3, emphasis mine. In the music, the word is emphasized by raising up a third from the previous note value.

¹⁹³ Special_Effect.

¹⁹⁴ Hartmere, Intrabartolo, and Shankel, “Cross,” 5-6.

Jason's youthful indiscretions, but "there are rules – there are rules! – that you have to obey."¹⁹⁵ Father Mike leaves Jason not with hope for a different future, but with an embodied vision of a life lived choosing to deny one's identity.

Prayer

Prayer offers an opportunity to communicate with the Divine as well as a convenient narrative reason for characters to sing their internal monologues out loud. In a musical in which the Divine is invoked as a potential character, however, stakes for prayer as a narrative act are high: answered prayers indicate a real, active, and interested Divine, while unanswered prayers suggest disapproval, disinterest, or lack of existence (a serious claim in a musical ostensibly at least partially about faith). *Bare: The Musical* suggests that God might exist – the Virgin Mary probably does – but He does not seem particularly interested in offering solace to or intervention on the behalf of His marginalized followers, offering no potential solace to audience members who might count themselves among them.

When Father Mike finds a pot-brownie-addled Peter alone in the sanctuary and asks why he is there, Peter's excuse that he "just came [t]here to pray" reads as just that.¹⁹⁶ Even when Peter references a codified prayer, he does so only obliquely – rather than reciting the Hail Mary, but instead just says "Hail Mary" and then repeats "Mary, Mary, Mary!" This is Peter's first moment alone onstage since the beginning of the musical (aside from a brief "You and I" reprise in which he continues to address Jason after Jason exits) and also the first time the audience has a chance to see a character in a sacred space after the brief glimpse of Mass. The moment does not offer an opportunity for probable increased connection with religious audience members who do

¹⁹⁵ Hartmere, Intrabartolo, and Shankel, "Cross," 6.

¹⁹⁶ Special_Effect.

not otherwise identify with the world of high school and partying, however, as Peter is not actually engaging in any recognizable act of worship.

Peter's hailing prompts Mary to arrive in a flurry of angels positioned as backup singers to a lounge act. (Sister Joan, cast as a white woman in this sole production of this iteration of the musical, shared that she was part of an R&B-inspired girl group in her youth; Mary, played by the same actor as Sister Joan, seems to be the living manifestation of this history.) Mary is impatient with being called on ("though I am a saint, my minutes are unlimited / but sad to say her patience ain't" Mary and the angels sing), especially by someone who does not know exactly what he is asking for. After all, she is "the Universe's 9-1-1, particularly for Latina women," and she is very busy.¹⁹⁷ (*Bare: The Musical* removed problematic element of having an African American nun caring for white children, but added racially insensitive humor including playing a white woman singing R&B for laughs; it is not a marked improvement.)

Mary does not come to Peter to convey a message, but she does confirm that his love is appropriate ("If two people fall in love and no one's hurt, what's wrong with that?" Peter asks. "Nothing," Mary answers) and, once he asks her for advice in getting Jason to feel comfortable with their relationship, encourages Peter to tell Jason he loves him – "It's never too soon to say you love someone. It's the greatest commandment for a reason," she explains.¹⁹⁸ (This is, incidentally, mildly theologically incorrect – loving other people is not the commandment called the "great commandment" in Christian tradition; that would be Matthew 22:37, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind," not the Matthew

¹⁹⁷ Special_Effect.

¹⁹⁸ Special_Effect.

22:39 that Mary is referencing.¹⁹⁹ The distinction is a small one, but it is likely a point that would immediately take any moderately practicing Christian out of the action of the musical for a moment.)

Mary's night club set is intentionally corny ("Jesus once asked me where babies come from. I had to say – quite honestly – that I didn't know.") It is *not*, however, particularly campy or particularly queer; Mary is not styled in a way reminiscent of any queer-affiliated performers and does not engage in winking language play that would align her performance with a queer aesthetic. It also is not particularly reverent or encouraging. Mary's self-centeredness is contrary to the Catholic imagination of the patient Virgin Mother. Mary is not stepping outside the confines of dogma in order to comfort Peter. She only affirms him at his request; her song is solely about telling him to leave her alone. There is nothing to endear this Mary to religious *or* queer audiences; the musical's portrayal of the character risks offending the first without ingratiating her to the second. It seems she does not make much of an impact on Peter, either, as he never mentions her visit to anyone and does not change his actions in any way as a result of it.

Actual prayers in the musical never yield positive results for the people praying them, either in the form of a stated or observable sense of peace/resolution or an observable response on the part of the Divine. The first actual prayer occurs nearly at the end of the first act, in a section of Jason's song "Role of a Lifetime" after he has broken up with Peter. "God, I need your guidance. Tell me what it means, to live a life where nothing's as it seems. Spending days in silent fear. Spending nights in lonely prayer. Hoping that one day when you wake those feelings won't be there," he sings then, later, "a girl who'll make me happy. Isn't that what I should

¹⁹⁹ NIV

want?”²⁰⁰ He does not get a response. Likewise, when Peter and Matt sing “Are You There,” praying alone in separate spaces as they ask for God’s feedback and reassurance about their romantic relationships, they do not receive any supernatural sign or visitation in spite of asking God to “send a sign so that I know you’re there.”²⁰¹ They remain in separate places, not even able to hear or reassure each other.

Father Mike does not quote scripture or even pray with or for Jason when Jason comes to him for guidance; he encourages Jason to pray for courage in two measures of the 82-measure song. It is no wonder, then, that neither Peter nor Jason feel that prayer is likely to be a meaningful tool for evaluating their relationship. In fact, in their final song together they position the two as oppositional – Jason affirms that Peter *is* “the answer,” while Peter makes it clear that prayer *is not* – “if prayer were the answer I’d fall on my knees.”²⁰² In a musical that does not craft a history of Peter as a prayerful person who has already received clear answers, Peter’s subsequent suggestion that “forward is calling and I cannot stay here” seems to suggest that his leaving is a rejection of a world that sees prayer as a potential source of wisdom as much as graduating from an institution where he does not feel nurtured.²⁰³ In the world of this musical, prayer offers no answers.

²⁰⁰ Hartmere, Intrabartolo, and Shankel, “Role of a Lifetime,” 3-5.

²⁰¹ Hartmere, Intrabartolo, and Shankel, “Are You There,” 7. As a reminder, “Are You There” and this invocation on Peter’s part is what inspires the visit from the Virgin Mary in *bare: a pop opera*.

²⁰² Hartmere, Intrabartolo, and Shankel, “Bare,” 2, 4.

²⁰³ Hartmere, Intrabartolo, and Shankel, “Bare,” 4.

Peter and Jason

While the world of *bare: a pop opera* is one in which queerness has not previously been addressed in any way within St. Cecelia's walls, the characters of *Bare: The Musical* are both aware of and have distinct points of view on LGBTQ identities. The athletes are constantly casually homophobic and tease each other with anti-gay slurs. Other characters are also aware of queerness as a concept – Nadia makes a jab at Ivy about whether she might have Sister Joan's number in her phone, but the cutting remark is not particularly vicious because it suggests queerness; the cruelty of it stems from the fact that Ivy allegedly slept with another teacher at her old school. For her part, Ivy identifies Peter as queer: "I think he likes you," she tells Jason, referring to Peter.²⁰⁴ "Look at him sometime. He watches you 'cross the room. It's cute."²⁰⁵ Jason does not find it cute. In a musical ostensibly about Peter and Jason's great star-crossed love, that incongruence signals a significant problem: Peter and Jason are not in a healthy relationship.

Bare: The Musical's lead producer, Randy Tadash, said in an interview that "we're in a different world now. The struggle is still there, but it has evolved."²⁰⁶ In adjusting the setting of the musical to a world where some LGBT young people are able to be visibly, self-confidently queer and then consistently disempowering the musical's queerest character, *Bare* offers an uncomfortable goulash of representation that does not engage the problems (or joys) of this different world with sufficient depth; the world as represented in the musical is different, but there is little hope that it is better. Opening in a sea of media – both theatre and film and

²⁰⁴ Special_Effect.

²⁰⁵ Special_Effect.

²⁰⁶ Weinert-Kendt, 6.

television – considering adolescent sexuality, *Bare: The Musical* falls into almost all the representational traps Shelley and Craig note as occurring in emerging adult LGBTQ media representation, where queer characters are often “portrayed as martyrs, targets or victims of violence and discrimination, and as in need of adult or institutional protection.”²⁰⁷ Rather than martyring queer teens as the victims of a homophobic world, however, *Bare: The Musical* tells the story of a young man who was a victim of relational violence and the martyrdom of his abuser.

Peter is written as being more explicitly queer than Jason from their first scene together. First, he identifies as gay and has no problem using the term or a variety of variations on it. (Imagining he is Jason talking to his mother, Peter says “I am a homosexual. I dig guys. I am a guy digger.”)²⁰⁸ Second, he embodies certain gay stereotypes. He does not understand sports – he sings to Jason “Look at you, you’re a quarter something. Look at me, I’m at best a mascot. Look at us, who would believe?”²⁰⁹ Peter is depicted as being particularly sexual – referring to himself in his roleplay as Jason addressing Jason’s mother, he says “Fun fact – though he’s short, shockingly, mom, his penis is bigger than mine,” and when Jason questioned his sexuality he said, “You are gay. Your cum was in my mouth.”²¹⁰

Peter’s queerness is positioned as predestined. He is coded as more feminine than Jason, and when he makes a wish about going off to the “second star on the right and straight on ‘til

²⁰⁷ McInroy and Craig, 35.

²⁰⁸ Hartmere, Intrabartolo, and Shankel, “You and I,” 4.

²⁰⁹ Hartmere, Intrabartolo, and Shankel, “You and I,” 3.

²¹⁰ Special_Effect.

morning” where he and Jason can properly be together (after Jason scolds him for being too close inside during a dance) he and Jason have the following exchange:

Jason: What’s that from?

Peter: Peter Pan.

Jason: Now that *is* gay.

Peter: Shut up, that’s who I was named after.

Jason: You never had a chance, did you?

Peter: I’m not worried. I got you to protect me.²¹¹

The teasing between them is affectionate, but the exchange further emphasizes the positioning of Peter and Jason as a couple composed of masculine-of-center and feminine-of-center partners, with many of the gendered stereotypes one would expect from a heterosexual pairing between masculine-of-center and feminine-of-center people. Peter needs protection; Jason needs Peter to stop nagging.

Jason is unquestionably the protagonist – the musical opens by talking about him, he is the character who undergoes a personal awakening and shift in perspective throughout the story, other characters’ arcs rotate around his, and he is clearly supposed to be sympathetic. Jason gets extensive opportunities to explore his internal reality and work through his experiences, thoughts, and feelings onstage through solo songs, giving the audience extensive access to his interior life. In contrast, while Peter also frequently sings alone, his songs are entirely focused on Jason. Peter opens the musical by saying “I was asked to say a few words. I thought I should begin by telling you who I am,” but he never tells us who he is aside from “a gay boy in love with an athlete.”²¹² His job is to perform emotional labor for Jason, pine over Jason, and ultimately carry on Jason’s legacy; it is not a disruption of Peter’s goals, because he has none.

²¹¹ Special_Effect.

²¹² Special_Effect.

“I’m not sure I know how to be. Without you,” he tells Jason.²¹³ That is true – Peter has no defining characteristics outside of their relationship.

There is, of course, nothing wrong with representations of feminine-of-center queer men – they exist, and they deserve to have art that represents them in a complex way. There is also value in narratives exploring the intersections of queerness and toxic masculinity, particularly in spaces (like athletics) that assume both heterosexual desire and masculine gender presentation as the default for successful male participants. *Bare: The Musical*, however, combines the two in ways that reinscribe problematic gendered stereotypes and suggests that there is no hope for queer joy; queer people are destined to be violent and/or be victims of violence.

Peter and Jason’s relationship is emotional (and, occasionally, physical) abuse packaged as romance. While that is not unheard of in musical theatre history (in *Carousel*, for example) it seems irresponsible for a musical specifically recrafted to serve as an outreach tool to LGBTQ young people to depict this conflation of abuse and romance without commenting on it.²¹⁴ This is particularly true given the fact that the frequency of emotional and physical abuse among same-sex partners is estimated to be as high or higher than in opposite-sex relationships, but without similar levels of research or resources.²¹⁵ Jason frequently yells at Peter, frequently implies that Peter is stupid or naïve (and immediately attempts to smooth it over), isolates Peter from others

²¹³ Hartmere, Intrabartolo, and Shankel, "LMAO," 5.

²¹⁴ *Bare: The Musical*’s creative team worked with the Tyler Clementi Foundation, a group working to improve the environments of schools, churches, and other community spaces for LGBTQ youth.

²¹⁵ See, for example, Catherine Finneran and Rob Stephenson, “Antecedents of Intimate Partner Violence among Gay and Bisexual Men.,” *Violence and Victims* 29, no. 3 (2014): 422–435 or Patrick McKenry, Julianne Serovich, Tina Mason, and Katie Mosack, “Perpetration of Gay and Lesbian Partner Violence: A Disempowerment Perspective,” *Journal of Family Violence* 21, no. 4 (2006): 233–243.

(including making rules about to whom Peter is allowed to speak about their relationship), allows Peter to be physically intimidated and belittled by others in front of him without intervention, minimizes Peter's feelings, and maintains complete control over the parameters of the relationship.²¹⁶

Peter begins to address the problematic behavior once when Jason suggests that the relationship cannot continue if Peter is going to have expectations: "No! You don't get to say that, you can't just decide, I've done everything you've asked of me. I've followed your lead as we wander in circles, you dictate, I always agree. Lower your voice, dance beside me, not with me! A lit'ny of rules I was quick to obey," Peter sings, seeming to take a stand and open a dialogue about his treatment in the relationship...before continuing, "But if this is goodbye I have something I've wanted to say. I meant to tell you I love you. I've been waiting to say it, as always my timing."²¹⁷

Peter seems to have bought into Jason's suggestion that the problem is Peter's lack of practicality rather than anything else – when Jason responds by characterizing Peter as foolish through language shaming his queerness and desire to be open about it before leaving: "Okay, Peter Pan, you tell me what's the plan? [...] This is not some fairy tale where wands are waved and problems disappear. Turn the page, the story's ending. Time to stop pretending 'cuz there's no such thing as heroes who are queer."²¹⁸ Peter does not double down on his complaints when he is left alone onstage (traditionally a time for characters to explore their innermost thoughts

²¹⁶ These markers are adapted from the Multidimensional Measure of Emotional Abuse scale, Christopher Murphy and Sharon Hoover, "Measuring Emotional Abuse in Dating Relationships as a Multifactorial Construct," *Violence and Victims* 14, no. 1 (1999): 39–53.

²¹⁷ Hartmere, Intrabartolo, and Shankel, "I Meant to Tell You," 2-3.

²¹⁸ Hartmere, Intrabartolo, and Shankel, "I Meant to Tell You," 3-4.

with the audience; what is sung in these moments is generally true, at least as far as the character is aware) but rather reiterates that he has poorly timed his declaration of love.

Bare: The Musical could have used this moment as an opportunity to engage in an exploration of the effects of the stress of attempting to perform normative masculinity in a heterosexist society, as – according to Christopher Blackwell – “those who feel inadequate, or feel they lacking self-efficiency, are at risk of using unconventional means of power assertion, including violence. These same individuals oftentimes overcompensate by exerting control over a person who they perceive as threatening or who might expose their insecurities.”²¹⁹ Peter and Jason’s journey towards a healthier and more equitable relationship, Peter’s path extracting himself from an unhealthy relationship, or Jason’s task of learning to deal with his emotions in more appropriate ways could all have shed light on a topic on which queer youth are sorely in need of additional education. Instead, Jason sings “Role of a Lifetime,” explaining his own challenges with his sexual identity and seemingly excusing his behavior; there certainly are never any consequences for it. (Peter is momentarily annoyed with Jason later for asking him to promise to keep their former relationship secret, but once Jason leaves Peter internalizes the blame for the conflict once more – “Pushed too hard, what a stupid thing to do. Don’t you see I’m not me without you?”)²²⁰

In the second act, Peter begins to deal with the effects of their relationship once more, imagining telling people about his relationship with Jason to “let them know I’m someone,” complaining that “you made me feel so small” and zeroing in on internalized homophobia as a

²¹⁹ Christopher Blackwell, "Domestic Violence Among Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Persons," in *Continuing the War Against Domestic Violence, Second Edition*, ed. Lee E. Ross (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2015), 181.

²²⁰ Hartmere, Intrabartolo, and Shankel "One," 6.

probable reason for Jason's behaviors, probably exacerbated by Peter's comfort with his own sexuality – "I know your damage. Faggot this, faggot that, all the self-loathing...Afraid to look too closely, why? You might find your reflection."²²¹ Once again, though, Peter's train of thought is not allowed to reach a lyrical conclusion – the song is picked up by Jason, who relates his terror at being rejected for his sexual identity. Father Mike and Sister Joan step in as his imaginary version of his parents when he gets off the phone and imagines what would happen if he came out to his family. "I won't love you...I will leave you...They will hate you!... I won't believe you!" his "parents" warn before joining the rest of the cast in intoning "What have I told you? Be a man!" repeatedly.²²² The musical positions Jason's internal conflict about others' imagined perceptions of his masculinity as more important than Peter's concerns about actual lived events.

After these events, it is unsurprising when Jason escalates to physical violence in rehearsal, pushing Peter to the ground. (This physical violence was portended in the staging of the off-Broadway production, as Jason frequently closed the distance between himself and others during moments of conflict in a quick, threatening manner or grabbed others' arms or shoulders before escalating to actual shoving.) After this event, Peter attempts to quit the play, then has a heart-to-heart with Sister Joan. "It's just...I feel like we fell down this hole, and I just keep falling. I don't think I'm ever gonna be anywhere else, just here. I look around and there's no one. There's just no one. I don't wanna be here anymore," he says.²²³ Sister Joan *does* reassure Peter that his queerness is okay, affirming his queerness using the language of the Church: "Why

²²¹ Hartmere, Intrabartolo, and Shankel, "What If I Told," 3-4.

²²² Hartmere, Intrabartolo, and Shankel "What If I Told," 8-9.

²²³ Special_Effect.

would you be someone else for someone else's sake? You're created in His image, you're a perfect child of God. And this part of you, it's the heart of who you are."²²⁴ She does *not*, however, address Peter's obvious suicidality or Jason's violence. Instead, she continues to actively encourage the relationship and suggests that Peter excuse the abuse. "He's a good boy, Jason, he's just scared, that's all that is," she reassures.²²⁵

Sister Joan is the musical's designated "cool adult," answering students' questions about her history (including her high school girl group). She was transferred from another parish because she talked to girls who were sexually active about contraception. Sister Joan is consistently positioned against the old-fashioned conservatism of the Church, encouraging students to make physically and emotionally healthy decisions even if they are not in line with doctrine...and she watches a student's boyfriend physically assault him in rehearsal and tells him that said boyfriend is "just scared."²²⁶ She does not talk about safety resources. She does not intervene with Jason. Peter's task in the musical is to be openly gay and love the boy who cannot at any personal cost; the character who operates as the musical's level head and moral center confirms it.

Jason's apology the next time he and Peter meet is familiar to everyone who has ever watched an after-school special about cycles of abuse:

Jason: Look, what happened at rehearsal...I just snapped. It all happened so fast and I just reacted. I overreacted.

Peter: It's okay.

Jason: No, it's not. That isn't me, I didn't mean to – It was wrong. I was wrong. I can't get that image out of my head of you lying there.

Peter: It's okay.

²²⁴ Hartmere, Intrabartolo, and Shankel, "You're Not Alone," 4.

²²⁵ Special_Effect.

²²⁶ Spevial_Effect.

Jason: No, it's not. Can you forgive me?²²⁷

Peter immediately agrees, and suggests the two “can make this work” – but only “if [Jason] want[s] to.”²²⁸

There is no way to know whether this might have led to a more robust renegotiation of the boundaries of the relationship to achieve a healthier balance or might have been what it appears to be (the beginning of a honeymoon period before another cycle of conflict). Their conversation is interrupted by Ivy (providing news that she is pregnant) and Matt (providing news that he has found the photo of Peter and Jason kissing, then distributing it to the student body via text). Jason's stress response is to lash out, and he does so towards Matt before demanding that Peter tell everyone it was not Jason that Peter was kissing. Peter leaves without comment.

In the end, it is Peter (not Jason) who faces severe social censure as the result of the revelation of their relationship – the next time Peter appears onstage, someone has hit him. When Jason asks Peter to run away with him, echoing Peter's earlier desire to go to the “second star to the right, straight on till morning,” it is Peter's turn to insist that their fairytale is impossible – “we have to grow up.”²²⁹ After the rejection, Jason takes the drug from which he will eventually overdose. Peter is “left to wonder if [he] could have shown [Jason] that the world should not forsake [him], that the world should love [him] well,” since he and Jason were “meant to be.”²³⁰

²²⁷ Special_Effect.

²²⁸ Special_Effect.

²²⁹ Special_Effect.

²³⁰ Hartmere, Intrabartolo, and Shankel, "No Voice," 5-6.

Throughout the musical, any concern Peter expresses about his romantic relationship with Jason is immediately overshadowed by Jason's personal turmoil about his own sexual identity; the queer-coded boy's hope for a happy, healthy relationship is always less important than the conventionally masculine boy's pain, and that pain explains and excuses any behavior that results from it. The only inexcusable act is Peter's decision to set and maintain a boundary at last when he refuses to continue dating Jason, a decision the narrative causally links to Jason's death.

Within the context of this relationship, the musical also fails to offer tools for building resilience through Peter and Jason's characters. They *physically* escape together at the beginning of the musical, but neither character successfully engages in coping through escapism in the form of imagining alternative futures (in spite of Jason's previously-quoted assertion that Peter wants a fairytale). They do not fight back – Peter consistently caves to Jason's demands for secrecy and Jason never stands up for himself or for his lover. Finally, while Peter could ostensibly be interpreted as seeking community with Sister Joan, that potential community is disbanded with her transfer. The text of Peter's introduction – "I was asked to say a few words. I thought I should begin by telling you who I am" – implies that most people in the school he has been attending for some time do not know him even after the previous months' events; he is actively excluded from the community. Jason's decision to take his own life is made not out of fear of public censure, but the reality of it.²³¹

Jason's suicide is a tragedy, and unfortunately completely within the realm of possibility – the "It Gets Better" project referenced in "A Million Miles from Heaven" was, after all, founded as an intervention after a rash of LGBTQ teen suicides. The story of a boy who did not know how to deal with the tension between who he was and who the world expected him to be

²³¹ Special_Effect.

and attempted to cope through violence towards others and himself would certainly be a sad one, but one with the possibility to operate as a cautionary tale or resource. Couching that story as a love story without acknowledging its abusive elements is dramaturgically irresponsible in a musical intended, in part, as an outreach effort for young audiences.²³²

Sacrilege

Although I have largely attempted to consider *Bare: The Musical* on its own except where comparisons to its source material are particularly useful for understanding the significance of the adaptation, the intersections of the Peter and Jason's relationship and religiosity in both benefit from comparison. *Bare: The Musical* does not engage liturgy or other elements of faith in a way that creates effective opportunities for audience connection with the musical or poses a nuanced critique of the Church, nor does it depict a healthy romantic relationship between its main characters. The two collide in an interesting way in the somewhat sacrilegious way in which Peter speaks of Jason, positioning him as divine in his own right. This offers a contrast to the ways in which Peter and Jason's relationship in *bare: a pop opera* spurred Peter on to a closer relationship with the Divine.

Peter positions Jason and their relationship as a gift from God in the musical and the pop opera, with the line "our love was pure and nothing else brought me closer to God" occurring in both musicals.²³³ In *bare: a pop opera*, that is a demonstrable fact – Peter is engaged in a near-constant conversation with the Divine about his relationship with Jason, and when he is forced to make a choice between Jason's wishes and Divine instructions, he prioritizes his faith. Jason is a

²³² For a more explicit discussion of the musical's ties to youth outreach efforts, see Michael Luongo, "Newlywed Glamour, LGBT Youth Needs Share Stage at 'BARE' Opening," *Gay City News*, December 19, 2012, 16.

²³³ Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 112; Hartmere, Intrabartolo, and Shankel, "Absolution," 2.

reason Peter's religious faith grew and evolved, but his faith is not dependent upon his relationship with Jason.

In *Bare: The Musical*, however, Peter rarely attempts to actually engage the Divine. Instead, he uses language that positions Jason *as* divine, singing not "you were the answer to a prayer" but "you answered a prayer," assigning Jason the power to do so.²³⁴ It is to Jason that Peter speaks when he is alone in the sanctuary and tells Father Mike that he was praying. (Curiously, talking to Jason in *Bare: The Musical* and praying in *bare: a pop opera* have the same effect of summoning the Virgin Mary. Perhaps Jason is holy, after all.)

Peter's final communication with Jason in *Bare: The Musical*'s "No Voice" engages Messianic imagery for Jason, but without any of the dramaturgical underpinning for the Messianic imagery used for Peter in the pop opera. "I wish I could make you see that in you God was very pleased," which Peter sings to the now-dead Jason, is a paraphrase of the language three of the four Gospels in the Bible cite God as using after Jesus' baptism. "And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased'" in Matthew 3:17, for example.²³⁵ The sentiment – affirming God's love for His queer child – is a beautiful one, but it seems strange for Peter to be forcefully stating God's opinion when he has not experienced much interest in it throughout the musical. Furthermore, while Jason is certainly grievable, he is far from above reproach as the musical moment suggests.

At the end of *Bare: The Musical*, Father Mike apologizes and Peter forgives him before going on to deliver Jason's eulogy, but outside the context of confession there is no deeper

²³⁴ Special_Effect.

²³⁵ NIV. Some other occurrences are Mark 1:11 and Luke 3:22.

theological significance to this reversal of roles. *Bare: The Musical* rarely engages corporate liturgical acts – the one gesture towards it is interrupted with a song immediately – and places little weight on the sacraments; confession operates as a plot device, little more. Without a degree of reverence for the religious elements of St. Cecelia’s to balance the students’ disdain, the musical removes the possibility of engaging with those elements as anything but repressive. There is also no opportunity to consider the Divine as a benevolent force outside the mediation of a priest or other religious authority; though a very unhelpful Mary appears once, the few instances of actual prayer in the musical never lead to answers. Of the two boys, Jason seeks divine guidance (marginally) more often, and it has no effect on his ultimate choice to end his life. “Choices,” Father Mike says in his eulogy. “We feel like we don’t have none. There’s always a choice.”²³⁶

Choices are important, but queer teens watching *Bare: The Musical* have few of them if they are seeking positive characters with which to identify. Sister Joan is being transferred away from the school after Jason’s death. Father Mike has followed the Church-sanctioned path for queer people (a life of chastity) but does not seem more peaceful for that decision. Jason is gone. Peter has never had an identity beyond Jason and does not ultimately seem to have decided he should have been treated better than he was in the relationship, so while there is hope that post-high-school life will let him be “out, queer, all that,” there are no reassurances that he has the skill set to do so in a healthy way.

In his review, N.Y. Times’ David Rooney critiqued the lack of imagination in *Bare’s* depiction of “the collision between church and the adolescent discovery of self and

²³⁶ Special_Effect.

sexuality...”²³⁷ *Bare* offers no point of entrance for religious audience members attempting to connect with characters they do not know or understand through a faith system they know well; the Church just is not ultimately very important to the narrative, serving as an uncomplicated backdrop for the real story about teen bullying and toxic masculinity. Even the characters who speak about God or otherwise embody the Divine do not do so in a way that suggests actual familiarity with or interest in Catholicism, much less investment in its doctrine as indicative of reality or some kind of truth. Maintaining religious language without meaningfully engaging religious content smacks of insincerity. It also overlooks an opportunity to provide certain audience members with access to the production and to engage in a critique that could differentiate the musical from other moody explorations of adolescent sexuality to which it was compared.

Many critics suggested that *Bare: The Musical* lacked its own coherent identity, instead serving as the “poor man’s *Spring Awakening*” and operating in the uncanny valley of a world that looked and sounded like 2012, but with social mores of a decade prior.²³⁸ The time period is not the only element in the musical that does not hold up to scrutiny. *Bare* is theoretically a love story, but the relationship at its core is unhealthy, without the balance one might expect from an activist-minded musical. *Bare* brings in the possible pitfalls of technology in the lives of young people, but none of their potential joy – after all, bullies exist on the internet, but so do many more positive resources for community and encouragement. *Bare* is set in a Catholic institution and nods to the Church, but does not do so with a depth or attention to detail that either allows

²³⁷ Rooney, “Ill-Fated,” C2.

²³⁸ David Hurst, “Curtain Up,” *New York Arts Review*, January 4, 2013, 30.

straight religious audience members to access the material or honors the complexity of the internal conflicts of queer people of faith.

Though I have attempted to consider *Bare: The Musical* as its own piece of theatre outside the context of the original pop opera, that context infects the production; the musical attempts to fit a hipper, more cynical, more “realistic” narrative into the casing of a deeply earnest opera fever dream. The fit is an uneasy one. In removing the strange, specific elements that made sure *bare* was beloved by only a few (singing Mass! singing Shakespeare! conjuring The Mother of God through the power of harmonized prayer!), *Bare* unintentionally offers a musical without holiness *or* hope.

Conclusion

Bare: The Musical and *bare: a pop opera* were eight years apart in time but worlds apart in ideology. While both musicals offer the same basic plot, the conclusions they draw about the role of faith communities in supporting the QPoF among them (and the likely outcome of QPoF seeking support) are markedly different. They also offer audiences significantly divergent experiences.

Bare: The Musical sounds and looks like contemporary musical theatre, complete – in its off-Broadway production – with slick projections, fluid modern dance, and an integration of technology in the plot marking it as part of its current era. It is written cinematically, flowing from moment to moment in a style to which contemporary audiences are accustomed. The musical is polished, with characters filling recognizable social niches and songs slotting into expected styles in a way that makes the work easily digestible...so much so that it does not stand out in comparison to other, arguably better works of similar style. The musical’s familiar packaging makes it easy to overlook the troubling character dynamics within. It is what audience

members going to see a contemporary musical are likely to expect, and it delivers, up to and including fulfilling religious audience members' documented expectations that commercial theatre will fail to take their faith systems seriously.

Bare: a pop opera depicts QPoF who have genuine hope of connecting with and receiving the blessing of the Divine, offering straight and cis religious audience members a protagonist who performs his religiosity in familiar, identifiable ways while giving QPoF in the audience examples of people who are managing to integrate both important parts of their identity. The musical treats the characters' faith lives as just as important to them as their sexual identities and offers hope that, even if one's current environment is stifling, the wider world has space for one to be (and be loved for) who one is fully and authentically.

The great tragedy of *bare: a pop opera* is not that the world is unkind but that Jason never gave the world a chance to reject him – he assumed that they would and acted accordingly. He did not give himself the chance to live beyond the moment to be proven wrong. Like Jason, *bare: a pop opera* is destined to live in its moment. The plot and music both mark it as existing in a certain period of time before laws for marriage equality – or for conventions of the contemporary rock musical – were established. It is not polished, but eternally messy and imperfect, frozen in its licensing agreement in a tension between its creators' ambitions and their expertise.

Perhaps it is that tension, that sense of always reaching and never quite grasping, that make *bare: a pop opera* a much more satisfying picture of queerness and faith than *Bare: The Musical's* confident fistful of empty air.

Chapter 2: “Does Anybody Here Love My Jesus?”:

Protestant Performances of Piety

Bare: a pop opera's story of queer Catholic teenagers marked the beginning of a wave of musicals engaging QPoF early in the millennium. The previous chapter illustrated how musicals can use liturgical performance onstage to engage in acts of collective cultural memory that forge connections between QPoF and other religious audience members. This works best for audience members who belong to denominations that share the characters' liturgical traditions, which – according to the Pew Research Center – accounts for roughly twenty percent of the American public.²³⁹ Approximately twice as many people, however, belong to Protestant denominations in the U.S., some of which have liturgical traditions and some of which do not.

In this chapter, I explore *The Prom* and *Choir Boy*, two additional musicals that share many characteristics with *bare: a pop opera* and *Bare: The Musical* (queer protagonists with closeted partners in contemporary high schools) but center Protestant characters in largely Protestant communities. Absent a liturgical tradition that offers clear reasons for characters to participate in communal worship, these musicals' creators write characters who engage in other public expressions of piety, from group prayer to quoting Scripture. While I look at all religious engagement in *Choir Boy* and *The Prom*, it is the handling of Scriptures (and other religious texts) within the musicals that characterizes the musicals' overall orientation towards religious audience members and, hence, their opportunities (or lack thereof) for religious audience members to experience the kind of identification with characters suggested in the previous chapter.

²³⁹ Wormald.

Theologian John P. Burgess advocates for an approach to encountering Scripture that interprets Biblical texts not as technical manuals, but as a kind of poetry – “incarnational language” that communicates through metaphorical and affective layers of truth that extend beyond the purely logical.²⁴⁰ Reading scripture as poetry allows for “many overlapping associative patterns” to operate simultaneously, allowing for richer and more meaningful engagement with the text.²⁴¹ Both poetry and scripture, Burgess suggests, allow their readers (and listeners, reciters, and memorizers) to connect with the “transcendent,” the “ideal,” the world- and self-that-should-be rather than the world-and-self-that-is.²⁴² Through this lens, musicals offer a natural vehicle for scriptural encounters with the poetry of lyrics, their additional artistic layers of music and dance, and their tendency to privilege affective rather than literal truths in lyrical space.²⁴³

Burgess establishes the poeticism of scripture in order to make an argument for a sacramental interpretation of scripture. It is this interpretation that transforms scripture from a common text to a spiritual community-builder. Burgess explains:

One of the classic definitions of a sacrament is ‘a visible sign of an invisible grace.’ Perhaps we should think of the words of Scripture as ‘an audible signal of an inaudible grace.’ When Scripture is read, when it is explicated in preaching, when it is incorporated into prayers of thanksgiving and lament, when it frames the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, Scripture becomes a means by which Christians are gathered into the body of the

²⁴⁰ John P. Burgess, *Why Scripture Matters: Reading the Bible in a Time of Church Conflict*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 39.

²⁴¹ Burgess, 39, quoting literary critic Helen Vendler.

²⁴² Burgess, 46, 41.

²⁴³ For an extended explanation, see Scott McMillin, *The Musical As Drama: A Study of the Principals and Conventions behind Musical Shows from Kern to Sondheim*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

living Lord.²⁴⁴

In the same way that a character's engagement with communal worship in liturgical traditions performs their in-group status in that faith tradition by actually "doing" worship, a character's publicly demonstrated familiarity with scripture not only reflects enough attention to scripture to memorize it but initiates them into the community of believers through their scriptural interaction with the Divine.²⁴⁵ In the same way that private sacramental elements such as confession and reconciliation are part of a liturgical tradition because they reflect the truth of the Church momentarily distilled into an individual experience, scripture interpreted as sacrament reflects a personal connection to a wider truth of the Church, a truth in which religiously-aligned audience members share.

As in the previous chapter, I suggest that queer characters of faith's public engagement with scripture (and other sincere expressions of public piety) offer opportunities for non-queer religious audience members to identify with the characters in ways that are likely to make those audience members more receptive to the musicals' queer apologetics. Also as in the previous chapter, however, the efficacy of this strategy depends on the musical's creators writing in a way that treats characters' religious beliefs as an important part of their identity worthy of serious consideration. *Choir Boy* engages scripture and other performances of piety to make a culturally specific, nuanced argument for a reevaluation of the role of QPoF in the Black Church. In contrast, *The Prom* treats faith as a geographic inevitability rather than a meaningful category of identity, ultimately offering a tepid apologetic argument unlikely to preach to any but the converted.

²⁴⁴ Burgess, 43.

²⁴⁵ Burgess, 51.

Choir Boy (2013, 2019)

“The Black Church,” playwright Terrell McCraney writes, “serves as a spiritual anchor and a political anchor for the black community. And, in that tradition, we pass down a lineage of music, of an oral tradition, through young men who often must be duplicitous in nature.”²⁴⁶ The queer nature of many young men who carry the music of the Black Church and the community that prevents them from living openly and honestly is the subject of *Choir Boy*, a play with music that showed off-Broadway at the Manhattan Theatre Club (by whom it was commissioned) from July 2 to August 11, 2013 and ran on Broadway from January 8 to March 10, 2019.²⁴⁷ *Choir Boy* is set in the Charles R. Drew Prep School, an all-male, historically black academy well known for its boys’ choir. (While the text does not specifically state that Drew is a religious school, the school choir that exclusively sings spirituals suggests as much.) The new leader of that choir, Pharus Young, is a young queer man with a passion for creating updated arrangements of hymns and spirituals and a not-so-secret desire to be asked to sing the school song at graduation twice. The boys of the Drew choir compose most of the cast of the play and all struggle with navigating their paths to adulthood in their own ways, their collective struggles punctuated with a cappella musical arrangements.

Though only five years apart, the play’s off-Broadway and Broadway runs took place in very different cultural climates in the United States. The off-Broadway run began mere months

²⁴⁶ Tarell Alvin McCraney, “*Choir Boy* Scribe Tarell Alvin McCraney on the Untold Story of African-American Gospel Singers,” Broadway.com, June 25, 2013, <https://www.broadway.com/buzz/170337/choir-boy-scribe-tarell-alvin-mccraney-on-the-untold-story-of-african-american-gospel-singers/>.

²⁴⁷ The Black Church is, of course, not a monolith, but referencing it as a collective with certain shared values and cultural expectations is consistent with all the research I have consulted considering the Black Church. Guidelines for the case of the name of the Black Church are less consistent; in an effort to

after the swearing-in of the United States' first African American president, Barack Obama (who also became the first president to mention LGBTQ rights during his inauguration as he committed to working towards LGBTQ rights during his tenure as president).²⁴⁸ Marriage equality was a hot political topic as more states either legalized marriage equality or attempted to make constitutional amendments against it; *Choir Boy* was in previews on June 26 when the US Supreme Court struck down Section 3 of the Defense of Marriage Act, protecting benefits for queer couples who were legally married in any state. The momentum of the cultural moment is evident in reviews like Adam Feldman's, which questions whether the "changing times" are what allow for a queer character who "is not just a quiet victim."²⁴⁹ Many of the generally positive reviews remark on the novelty of Pharus' complexity as a fully fleshed-out character who is "by turns manipulative, charming, infuriating and endearing — part underdog, part pit bull and he embodies the traits of a survivor."²⁵⁰

By 2019, marriage equality had been the law of the land for four years. The 2016 election of Donald Trump led to significant political tension embodied, in part, in a rise of visible white nationalism and uptick in hate crimes, many of which were directed towards African

²⁴⁸ Shushannah Walshe, "Obama Makes History By Citing Gay Rights in Inaugural Address - ABC News," ABC News, January 21, 2013, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/obama-makes-history-citing-gay-rights-inaugural-address/story?id=18275341#.UaURH5zl6gg>.

²⁴⁹ Adam Feldman, "*Choir Boy* | Theater in New York," *Time Out New York*, February 3, 2013, <https://www.timeout.com/newyork/theater/choir-boy>.

²⁵⁰ Joe Dziemianowicz, "'*Choir Boy*': Theater Review," *New York Daily News*, July 3, 2013, <https://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/music-arts/choir-boy-theater-review-article-1.1388402>.

Americans.²⁵¹ Once more, reviews were largely positive, with McCraney’s recent success with the movie *Moonlight* frequently cited as giving the playwright new credibility. Many reviews noted the play’s focus on the empowering potential of art: “For playwright Tarell Alvin McCraney, art isn’t just for amusement, escapism, or cultural critique. It’s necessary. For Pharus, the protagonist of McCraney’s Broadway debut, art is even more than that — it’s survival,” critic Nick Romano writes.²⁵² The New York Times’ Jesse Green, among others, draws specific attention to the ways Pharus’ empowerment is tied not only to his artistic talent but to his alignment with religiously and culturally specific music. “When [Pharus] argues in class that it’s the joy of spirituals, more than any imputed secret messages they may contain, that demonstrates their real strength, we know that he is speaking also of those who sing them. Only by raising his natural voice, with whatever swish and swagger it contains, will Pharus set himself, and others, free.”²⁵³

The Black Church (referring to African American Christian faith communities of various denominations) has long been considered an important space of freedom for African Americans, a body that – according to Elijah G. Ward – “empowered black people socially, psychologically

²⁵¹ Alison Faupel, Heather L. Scheuerman, Christie L. Parris, and Regina Werum, “Analysis | Hate Crimes Are on the Rise. What Does It Take to Get State Governments to Respond?,” Washington Post, August 13, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/08/13/hate-crimes-are-rise-what-does-it-take-get-state-governments-respond/>.

²⁵² Nick Romano, “*Choir Boy* Review: Moonlight Writer Tarell Alvin McCraney Makes Broadway Debut.” *Entertainment Weekly*, January 8, 2019. <https://ew.com/theater-reviews/2019/01/08/choir-boy-review/>.

²⁵³ Jesse Green, “Review: Raising a Joyful New Voice in Tarell Alvin McCraney’s ‘*Choir Boy*,’” The New York Times, January 8, 2019, sec. Theater, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/08/theater/choir-boy-review.html>.

and physically during and after slavery.”²⁵⁴ Courtney C. C. Heard Harvey and Richard J. Ricard point out that the Black Church continues to serve “as a source of social support, personal affirmation, and promotion of emotional and psychological well-being for 97% of African American people in the United States,” offering a space (relatively) removed from the racial prejudices congregants face in everyday life in contemporary society.²⁵⁵ Significant portions of the Black Church, however, maintain rigid expectations for performances of gender expression and sexuality, meaning that “the church is often identified as one of the most oppressive environments that gay men encounter” in spite of the fact that many black gay men are leaders in their faith communities, particularly in music.²⁵⁶

McCraney engages an argument about church music and the (often queer) people who preserve and perform it to demonstrate that black QPoF have always been part of their faith communities and deserve to be treated as full members without obligating them to secrecy or shame; Pharus’ sincere spirituality and unquestionable queerness are both important parts of who he is. (Speaking of the innate nature of both his sexuality and religiosity, one of Pitt’s respondents in his study of religious black gay men quipped, “Just like I believe I’m born this

²⁵⁴ Elijah G Ward, “Homophobia, Hypermasculinity and the US Black Church,” *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 7, no. 5 (2005): 493 <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691050500151248>.

²⁵⁵ Courtney C. C. Heard Harvey and Richard J. Ricard, “Contextualizing the Concept of Intersectionality: Layered Identities of African American Women and Gay Men in the Black Church,” *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development* 46, no. 3 (2018): 210, <https://doi.org/10.1002/jmcd.12102>.

²⁵⁶ Richard N Pitt, “‘Still Looking for My Jonathan’: Gay Black Men’s Management of Religious and Sexual Identity Conflicts,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 57, no. 1 (2009): 39, 43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918360903285566>; Sandra L Barnes, “To Welcome or Affirm: Black Clergy Views About Homosexuality, Inclusivity, and Church Leadership,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 60, no. 10 (2013): 1418, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2013.819204>.

way...[y]ou can say that with Christianity, I was born again this way.”²⁵⁷ Services in the African American church, Harvey and Ricard explain, are intended to bring people into community, deepen the relationship with God and restore dignity to the congregants’ humanity.”²⁵⁸ *Choir Boy* centers the experience of a queer boy who is well aware that he is fearfully and wonderfully made – he is just waiting on everyone else to acknowledge it.

Music

The tension of queerness and faith is not incidental to *Choir Boy*; it is at the heart of the play. The stereotype of the choir boy to which the play’s title refers is a deeply entrenched one, referencing the queer men who frequently participate in (and, indeed, lead) the choir and other music ministries within their predominantly African American churches.²⁵⁹ Music in the play serves a variety of purposes, and *Choir Boy* is intentionally not always clear about which performances are diegetic (that is, which are snapshots of actual performances within the world of the play), which are operating closer to traditional musical theatre and capturing a moment in the lives of the characters, and which are neither. “I Couldn’t Hear Nobody Pray” is employed as a literal prayer to begin the choir rehearsal, both a way to speak to God and perform in-group belonging, as everyone in the choir knows their parts and the arrangement for the prayer. *Choir Boy* makes an argument that it is judgmental people, not the God on Whose behalf they claim to act, that make it difficult to be a QPoF.

²⁵⁷ Pitt, 46.

²⁵⁸ Heard Harvey and Ricard, 210.

²⁵⁹ This stereotype has been researched thoroughly. See, for example, Jones, “Peculiar People”; Michael Eric Dyson, “18: Homotextualities: The Bible, Sexual Ethics, and the Theology of Homoeroticism” in *Open Mike: Reflections on Philosophy, Race, Sex, Culture and Religion*. (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2003), 360-384; William G. Hawkeswood, *One of the Children: Gay Black Men in Harlem*. (Urbana, CA: University of California Press, 1997).

The music of *Choir Boy* does not merely *allude* to religious music with its lyrics or musical qualities; with two exceptions, all the songs featured are existing hymns or spirituals (the exceptions being pop music). In an NPR interview, McCraney notes the deep importance of spirituals to the African American community, explaining that they “are both spiritual, political and personal for all of us.”²⁶⁰ Cheryl Townsend Gilkes’ study of the musical genre W.E.B. DuBois labeled as “sorrow songs” explains that spirituals were not just “the musical hallmark of the African presence in the United States,” but serve as authoritative texts for a uniquely African American theology, “dynamic religious tradition that transcends denominational boundaries and that shapes the consciousness, beliefs and practices of African American Christians.”²⁶¹ The Black Church holds the Bible in particularly high regard, with many denominations favoring literal interpretations of the Word; Elijah G. Ward suggests that they are particularly leery of attempts to reinterpret the text that come out of presumably white institutions, such as the effort to recontextualize the Biblical passages that seem to condemn homosexuality.²⁶² Gilkes demonstrates, however, that spirituals offer accepted alternative scriptural interpretations that offer a theology of social justice that centers the Othered and oppressed, advocating for their value in the faith community.²⁶³ While Gilkes’ study explores ways in which women can use

²⁶⁰ Michel Martin, “‘Moonlight’ Writer’s Broadway Debut Stars A Queer, Black ‘Choir Boy,’” NPR.org, March 5, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/03/05/700405508/moonlight-writer-s-broadway-debut-stars-a-queer-black-choir-boy>.

²⁶¹ Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, “‘Go and Tell Mary and Martha’: The Spirituals, Biblical Options for Women, and Cultural Tensions in the African American Religious Experience,” *Social Compass* 43, no. 4 (1996): 563-564.

²⁶² Barnes, 1411; Ward, 495.

²⁶³ Gilkes.

spirituals to carve out spaces of importance in their churches, *Choir Boy* uses spirituals to cultivate such a space for young queer men.

The play opens on the Charles R. Drew Preparatory School commencement ceremony the year before most of the action of the play takes place, where (after a brief introduction by the headmaster) Pharus Young – the cheerfully femme rising leader of the school’s much-respected choir – is about to sing the school song “Trust and Obey,” as the seniors file into their graduation. He pauses in his singing after someone backstage whispers homophobic slurs and then continues the song. Right away, a precedent is set: not only is a queer boy both the keeper and deliverer of religious music as both choir lead and singer, but homophobia is an interruption to the religious expression of the music rather than a protector of it.

As Alisha Jones points out, choral performance carries with it certain connotations of effeminacy, particularly in the African American church; the choir in *Choir Boy* dodges this to some degree since it is an all-boys school, but Pharus’ personal commitment to song reads as part of his queerness...a part of his queerness that is explicitly wielded to glorify God.²⁶⁴ “Let Him use me,” Pharus explains of his desire to “go glory! Like only [he] can” in his dreamed-of second chance at singing the school song.²⁶⁵ There is a clear link between Pharus’ queerness and his “queering” (musical updating) of the choir’s hymnal arrangements: Bobby questions Pharus’ decision to create new arrangements of the music, then warns Pharus not to “be pushing dem

²⁶⁴ Jones, “Peculiar People.”

²⁶⁵ Terrell Alvin McCraney, *Choir Boy* (New York, NY: Theatre Communications Group, 2015), 34.

kinda rights up in here” when Pharus points out that arranging music is his right as the choir lead (“dem kinda rights” is a reference to gay rights, though no one ever uses that word).²⁶⁶

The new arrangements, the result of Pharus’ queer labor, are depicted as a blessing rather than an act worthy of condemnation. The Headmaster tells a teacher:

The choir has always had the more formal feeling but
Pharus is breaking that somehow, it’s...an event to hear them.
That’s the choir we have been waiting
For.²⁶⁷

Pharus explains his relationship to spirituals in a scene through a report in class called “Spirituals: Solely Songs for the Spirit” in which he argues that there is no real proof that spirituals contained coded messages to aid slaves in escape (as conventional wisdom dictates):

So rather than continuing to pass down these maybes to each other,
Who do we never pass down what we know to be true? That these songs forged in the
shame and brutality of oppression are diamonds that glint and prove true that hope and
love can live, thrive, and even sing.²⁶⁸

Pharus suggests that the joy and strength spirituals inspire “is the rebellion” even without additional coded messages, and one can draw clear parallels between his engagement with the school choir to escape his oppressive environment and the emotional respite he suggests spirituals brought to slaves.

Pharus’ argument is not just about emotional uplift, however, but spiritual:

...Does anybody here
Love my Jesus?
Don’t just diminish the song ‘cause it might not be
A strategic map guiding slaves North. What they were and are is Sweet Honey in the
Rock that didn’t just help the slaves
But help us now, this day. I been in the church where

²⁶⁶ McCraney, *Choir Boy*, 24.

²⁶⁷ McCraney, *Choir Boy*, 81.

²⁶⁸ McCraney, *Choir Boy*, 57.

The girl with the sin on her heart or the man with the ailment
 Found hope and a path 'cause of this music and it's
 Those melodies and pitch-harmonies and
 Rhythms – those are the maps and guides to the Promised
 Land. Not on this earth but elsewhere in my
 Father's house.²⁶⁹

Pharus (the only queer character about whom the audience knows at this point in the play) makes an argument of faith, not only centering himself as a believer and someone who seeks solace in God but as someone with a close enough connection to God to be a crafter of the melodies, harmonies, and rhythms the choir performs, adapting the old paths to the new terrain. In many ways, this scene serves as the thesis of the play, and it positions Pharus' work in the choir (which is connected to his queerness) as not only tolerable to the Lord but as a holy task.

Though the ensemble of boys remains in tension throughout the play, music serves as a connecting link between them. Sometimes the moments of connection and harmony are almost utopic, as when Pharus finishes talking to his roommate about how it feels like the entire school has it out for him and is then supported in song by the full ensemble as he sings "Eyes on the Prize," a song of encouragement. Sometimes they simply point out the reality of the boys' shared experience, as when "Rockin Jerusalem" provides the context for the boys' evening phone calls home. At other times, they *do* share characters' inner thoughts – David finds Mr. Pendleton to perform a 1970s love song (the script suggests "something like 'Love Ballad' by L.T.D" but leaves the specific song selection – and rights acquisition – up to each production) as he processes both the fact that he is in love with Pharus and prepares to confess to attacking him. Music is a form of escape for Pharus, a space in which his identity is not a detriment but, if anything, an asset.

²⁶⁹ McCraney, *Choir Boy*, 61.

Scripture and Sexuality

Christianity is a daily part of Pharus' life. Even his casual expressions make reference not only to God but to a belief that God is pleased with him – “This is the Lord’s passageway, let no follicle formed against me prosper,” Pharus responds when asked whether he stopped singing due to a vocal obstruction, then responds with “blessed and highly favored” when a fellow student asks how he is doing.²⁷⁰ While Pharus *does* express discomfort with others’ unfavorable opinions of his sexuality, he never voices any doubt that he is beloved of the Divine.

The intersections of queerness and faith in the play come to a head at the play’s climax, revealing that Pharus is not the only QPoF on campus. Jr. sings “There is a Fountain Filled with Blood” – a song about the power of water to wash away sins, to help sinners “lose all their guilty stains” – before Pharus enters the shower area where another boy, unseen to the audience, is showering.²⁷¹ The song choice coupled with the scene location suggest that Pharus is coming to the showers seeking absolution; were the play to wish to shame Pharus for his sexuality or the way he has expressed it, this would be the moment. QPoF, Pitt records, and *particularly* black QPoF, face a decision in their identity development process about whether they will attempt to suppress their sexuality, choose to disengage with their religion, compartmentalize the two parts of themselves, or attempt to integrate them.²⁷² Pharus’ decision is clear.

Pharus makes the link between queerness and faith explicit as he addresses this unseen boy in the shower, telling him that he heard him outside his bedroom door as Pharus was sitting and reading Samuel, “Like having it open was gon stop the world / Like magic words would

²⁷⁰ McCraney, *Choir Boy*, 15; 23.

²⁷¹ McCraney, *Choir Boy*, 100.

²⁷² Pitt.

summon up and knit souls together,” indicating that Pharus turned to scripture in times of trouble.²⁷³ The verse Pharus references is 1 Samuel 20:17, “for he loved him as he loved his own soul,” the first half of which (which Pharus does not quote) reads “And Jonathan made David swear again by his love for him,” meaning that Pharus is aligning himself with Jonathan and the unseen boy with David. David is a major hero of the faith in the Bible who had a very close friendship with Johnathan that is frequently interpreted as romantic (David describes Jonathan’s love for him as “more wonderful than that of women”).²⁷⁴ Pharus is clearly hewing to that interpretation, taking Jonathan’s request for affirmation of David’s love as confirmation that he is allowed to draw a line in the sand and ask for the same.²⁷⁵ As Pharus speaks, it becomes clear that he and the unseen boy had a romantic relationship that has been cast into limbo after some event, leading to the boy ignoring him. Pharus asks him to either “show up and be here” and affirm their relationship or “use what you know, / tell me to go on then, tell me to go away,” quoting 1 Samuel again, this time the passage in 20:42 where David and Jonathan are separating as David prepares to flee the violence of Samuel’s father: “Even with the swearing, / Say go in peace for as much as we have sworn in the name.”²⁷⁶

Pharus is demonstrating close familiarity with, even memorization of, scripture, once more performing his in-group status as a Christian. He clearly does not see a tension between his

²⁷³ McCraney, *Choir Boy*, 101.

²⁷⁴ 2 Samuel 1:26, NIV. See Pitt for an example of real black gay men drawing strength from David and Johnathan’s relationship.

²⁷⁵ 2 Samuel 1:26b NIV

²⁷⁶ McCraney, *Choir Boy*, 101; the translation McCraney uses is close to the American King James version, but does not match identically with any mainstream translation I have located.

romantic desires and his faith, instead using the Bible as a template for conducting even those elements of his interpersonal relationships that are not obviously connected to faith (as Sandra L. Barnes suggests the Black Church's expectations of scriptural engagement dictate he should).²⁷⁷ For those who recognize the Bible verses as Bible verses, this action is bold and clear, inviting his partner into a more honest, explicit partnership with him. Engaging faith and sexuality in tandem is likely not unusual for any QPoF in the audience, particularly black gay men; research suggests that most black gay men of faith choose partners who are also religiously affiliated.²⁷⁸ Pharus' honesty seems to be punished almost immediately – when Jr. walks into the locker room, whomever Pharus is talking to punches him, and a beating follows – but the apologetic thread picks up several scenes later as David is confessing to the Headmaster that he was the one who hit Pharus.

Though the audience does not become aware of David's sexuality until near the end of the play, David is also not straight and is also unusually engaged with faith elements, quoting scripture to comfort Bobby after Bobby storms out of the choir room. David is working on becoming a pastor, and Bobby uses that fact to discourage him from being friendly to Pharus, implying that religiosity and "sissiness" are incompatible: "you / Talking about you gon be a pastor don't let / These sissies get you by association," he warns.²⁷⁹ Bobby clarifies his meaning further, pointing out a time Pharus "draped 'cross" David when asking for a book and telling David, "I mean you supposed to be saved. Called. / What's going on with you!"²⁸⁰ David does

²⁷⁷ Barnes.

²⁷⁸ Pitt, 48.

²⁷⁹ McCraney, *Choir Boy*, 67.

²⁸⁰ McCraney, *Choir Boy*, 67-68.

not address Bobby's questions of faith but rather redirects the conversation to the fact that he cannot afford to cause the kinds of disruptions Bobby is causing given that he is a scholarship student. The conversation, however, clearly suggests that it is Bobby's point of view that is flawed. When he cautions David to be "careful who [he] walk with" and David responds that he "walk with the Lord," Bobby somewhat sacrilegiously warns, "they say He didn't keep the best company either. / Look what they did to Him."²⁸¹ In context, the statement aligns David's choices not to judge Pharus or pick sides in the dispute with Jesus' efforts to reach out to socially undesirable people; in hindsight, once David's identity is revealed, the comment even more closely aligns queerness and the Divine.

David also relies on scripture, quoting Psalm 139:14a, "We are fearfully and marvelously made," before launching into his own explanation, aligning himself with David as Pharus did:

Say he had just fought a fight he shouldn't have,
 Shed some blood he wasn't supposed to and wrote
 These words that's what they say in the you know the
 Scholarly accounts or...
 I don't believe it, sir.
 I don't believe this is a prayer for...regret or remorse
 Or whatever. I think he's...I think he's surprised at who
 He is...who he really is.
 I think he's looking down blood on his fingers and he saying what am I Lord?
 What a marvelous and fearful thing am I?
 Are all of us, sir.²⁸²

David is clarifying that, while he did hit Pharus, his personal crisis is bigger than what he did – it is about addressing who he is as a person. The kind of person who hurts Pharus, yes, but also the kind of person who loves Pharus and men like him. He describes the conflict he felt around his

²⁸¹ McCraney, *Choir Boy*, 68-69.

²⁸² McCraney, *Choir Boy*, 114-115.

relationship with Pharus, the way he would pray after every time they were together and wait for God's condemnation. "And the Lord was silent. I mean when I got called / To be a minister I could feel the spirit but when I was asking him to make this...make it...go away... / He fell so quiet," David explains.²⁸³ He is devastated that he hurt Pharus, but also that the act confirmed to him that he did, indeed, love Pharus, and was indeed like Pharus – "I looked at my hands and some of the blood spilling was my own," he says, possibly referring to literal blood as a result of punching Pharus but certainly referring to sharing the identity that made hitting Pharus seem reasonable.²⁸⁴ Pharus' choice to integrate his sexual and religious identity is an option some QPoF choose, but David's decision to attempt to suppress his sexuality and elect to participate in a display of hypermasculine violence is another; black men who attend church more often are more likely to have homophobic viewpoints, and queer-identified black men are not exempt.²⁸⁵

"I should have waited on the Lord," David laments.²⁸⁶ Gilkes explains that the spiritual pluralism practiced in much of the Black Church celebrates "a God who is both transcendentally majestic and highly personal," acting in large, society-shaping ways, but also connecting with individuals through the "still small voice" of the Holy Spirit.²⁸⁷ It is, then, perfectly reasonable for David to expect guidance from the Divine on matters of personal comportment; some black

²⁸³ McCraney, *Choir Boy*, 115.

²⁸⁴ McCraney, *Choir Boy*, 116.

²⁸⁵ Ward. Ward does not specify whether the homophobia of men of other races is positively correlated with church attendance.

²⁸⁶ McCraney, *Choir Boy*, 116.

²⁸⁷ Gilkes, 567-568.

churches expect a demonstration of such specific, individualized communication from their members.²⁸⁸

This is particularly true of ministers, for whom “call and Christian experience” is as important a qualification as any other factor.²⁸⁹ David’s concern that his sexuality would endanger his career in ministry is not unfounded – even those clergy members of the Black Church who are supportive of discreet LGBTQ members participating in the church do not want them in pastoral positions.²⁹⁰ Nonetheless, he received both a clear call from God to go into ministry (indicating that he was capable of receiving communication from the Divine) and *no* message of condemnation for his sexuality. He failed to interpret the second as the answer it was to his prayer to be delivered from his queer identity and the result is painful for everyone involved.

Choir Boy models QPoF engaging in the best practices of their faith to seek God’s will for their romantic lives and finding nothing but affirmation, not only in the way they feel or by extrapolating verses about the power of love to apply to sexuality but with specific support from scripture and specific personal communication (or lack thereof) from God. No one mounts effective faith-based arguments against them. Those who choose to interpret God’s views through the lens of a homophobic church are sadder but no more sanctified.

Representation and Resilience

There are elements of Pharus’ behavior that are stereotypical – he has a limp wrist the headmaster frequently corrects and is scripted to be effeminate. Some elements of stereotypes,

²⁸⁸ Gilkes, 576.

²⁸⁹ Gilkes, 576.

²⁹⁰ Barnes.

however, are grounded in truth; Pharus' effeminacy is an essential element of what McCraney wanted to interrogate in writing the play. McCraney writes:

We look at culturally effeminate boys, and we don't talk about them as human beings. We think of them as great singers and extraordinary musicians and talents, but their lives, who they are as people, is left outside of our conversations or our cultural consciousness... We sometimes eliminate people because of things that don't fit into our religious or cultural context, and it's damaging. I think we lose talents like Pharus because we're not recognizing their full humanity.²⁹¹

Ricard Pitt and Elijah Ward both point out that a great deal of the censure of queer men in the Black Church is not exclusively (or even primarily) anxiety about sexuality, but about gender expression, with gendered labels like "sissy" or "punk" replacing the specific naming of homosexuality.²⁹² Black men are disempowered and emasculated by a racist society, which makes it more important for them to effectively perform appropriate, culturally approved masculinity within their own communities.²⁹³ This, Ward explains, "supports a strong and exaggerated sense of masculinity within black communities that, along with homophobia, takes a significant but generally unexamined psychic and social toll on people's lives."²⁹⁴ Pharus' effeminacy, not only his sexuality, is key to his creation as someone who lives outside the social parameters of the Black Church (but well within the parameters of faith).

Pharus' gender expression is not written to be a one-note joke. It is simply part of who he is as a dimensional, complex character. The masculinity in which Pharus is interested is not tied to the angle of his wrist, but his personal integrity and identity as a Drew man. When the

²⁹¹ McCraney, "*Choir Boy Scribe*."

²⁹² Pitt, 40; Ward, 493.

²⁹³ Pitt, 40.

²⁹⁴ Ward, 493.

headmaster tries to get Pharus to tell him who was whispering during the graduation ceremony, Pharus explains:

If there is nothing I want to do is be
 And act as a Drew man should.
 I try to conduct my behavior by the book.
 I do not lie.
 And I don't snitch.²⁹⁵

He is referencing the school's unofficial honor code, which states that "A Drew man doesn't tell on his brother, / he allows him the honor to confess himself."²⁹⁶ Other students suggest that Pharus' unconventional physical performance of masculinity impairs him from engaging in measures of masculinity he actually values – "don't nobody snitch at Drew," Jr. says, prompting Bobby (the headmaster's nephew who whispered to Pharus backstage and was punished for doing so) to respond, "Don't nobody supposed to swish at Drew neither / But we two for two."²⁹⁷ Bobby again suggests a correlation between Pharus' femininity and perceived lack of honor when he makes a crack about Pharus going to tattle to the headmaster "faster than [his] little heels could click."²⁹⁸

Other characters frequently note Pharus' gender expression as problematic – the headmaster corrects his limp wrist on multiple occasions – but Pharus never attempts to defend his gender expression; he only pushes back against attacks on his personal character, the measures of masculinity in which he finds value. He does, however, sometimes use his "otherness" as a lever to apply pressure to others – Pharus questions whether the headmaster's

²⁹⁵ McCraney, *Choir Boy*, 15-16.

²⁹⁶ McCraney, *Choir Boy*, 18.

²⁹⁷ McCraney, *Choir Boy*, 22.

²⁹⁸ McCraney, *Choir Boy*, 25.

attempt to remove him as choir lead is because of his wrist (and the sexuality the headmaster fears his wrist reveals), and when Bobby balks at Pharus' decision to remove him from the choir, Pharus says, "Aw Bobby what you were saying about me on the / Stand, you, of all people shouldn't be surprised at / What I can do. And do well."²⁹⁹ Though Bobby and Pharus never make up onstage, Bobby honors Pharus in his performance of the school song at the end of the play by stopping and looking around where Pharus did the year before. Change does not happen overnight in *Choir Boy*, but there is hope that change is coming.

It is worth noting that Pharus is not written as a suffering saint, a sweet martyr. The character is allowed to be complex, including sometimes being unfair – when Bobby makes a crack about Pharus' sensitivity in front of a teacher during choir practice, Pharus demands that Jr. (Bobby's close friend who struggles with literacy) spells "sensitive." "Say if you wanna hurt a man hurt the thing he loves," Pharus explains when Bobby protests – like other resilient queer characters, he finds strength and snaps back.³⁰⁰ Pharus gets to be a full person. Further complicating conventional portrayals of adolescent queerness, there is no coming out narrative in *Choir Boy*. Pharus does not agonize over whether to tell his mother about his identity and never explicitly identifies as anything in particular; his queerness is treated as a given, visible to all from the time he was a child. He cites multiple incidences of people referring to him with homophobic slurs and never suggests that they were incorrect, only unkind; Pharus' problem is homophobia, not his identity. Pharus is a victim of social violence from his (presumably) straight peers, but the physical violence Pharus endures is more nuanced than the stereotypical antigay violence McInroy and Craig reflect as being overrepresented in media depicting LGBTQ young

²⁹⁹ McCraney, *Choir Boy*, 28.

³⁰⁰ McCraney, *Choir Boy*, 90.

people; it takes place at the hand of another self-loathing queer boy acting in a flight-or-fight response to potentially being discovered in the shower with Pharus.

Not all of Pharus' interactions with his straight age mates are antagonistic. Pharus and his roommate, AJ, have a close friendship that is both emotionally and physically intimate without being romantic or sexual, and they are able to have conversations about sexual identity that do not become tense or fraught. Pharus comments on AJ's penis in the locker room, teasing him about its size ("Whoever you saving that for gon be sore...I just hope they ready for all that") and AJ clarifies his heterosexuality, pointing out that Pharus uses gender-neutral pronouns when speaking about AJ's hypothetical partners, but the person with whom AJ will eventually be intimate is "she, a her."³⁰¹ The comment initially reads as a kind of defensiveness, but AJ turns the question around to ask Pharus whom he is "saving it for," revealing that the clarification was simply that rather than a preemptive rejection.³⁰² The following conversation takes place:

AJ: Who you saving it for?

Pharus: Oh me? Jesus.

AJ: I don't think Jesus interested.

Pharus: Well I'm here for whatever He needs.³⁰³

The exchange is pleasant, silly, but also communicates more than the surface words as AJ allows Pharus' dodging of the question but also signals an understanding that Pharus' potential romantic partner probably would be male (like Jesus) and Pharus accepts the good-natured teasing (and the acceptance it implies). AJ makes another attempt to allow Pharus an opportunity for self-

³⁰¹ McCraney, *Choir Boy*, 78.

³⁰² McCraney, *Choir Boy*, 78.

³⁰³ McCraney, *Choir Boy*, 78-79.

disclosure (“But what do you need, Pharus? You need anything?”) before David interrupts and chides them for having an inappropriate conversation in the locker room.³⁰⁴

Later, when Pharus scolds AJ for leaving his dirty socks on his side of the room and attempts to set one on fire as retribution, AJ and Pharus wrestle, and AJ pins Pharus down and tickles him. Pharus becomes aroused and pushes AJ away, mortified. Pharus asks AJ not to tell anyone and offers to help him find another room to stay in if he wants to move out, revealing that he has previously overheard people saying they would make room for AJ to keep him from having to stay with Pharus, but AJ is completely understanding. “You can’t help that, man,” he reassures.³⁰⁵

The exchange deepens AJ and Pharus’ friendship, but it also emphasizes to what degree other students ostracize Pharus as a result of his identity. It is this ostracization to which Pharus responds near the end of the play when the Headmaster is trying to get him to share the identity of the person who beat him up, a lifetime of people telling him that who he is makes him unworthy. He reveals that he did not attempt to defend himself when he was assaulted (he will not disclose by whom – Drew men do not snitch) and when the Headmaster asks him why not responds:

What you fight for? What you fight, sir?
 For, sir? You fight when you believe what
 You doing, what you are, is right. Huh.
 Everybody round you always telling you, showing
 You that you ain’t nothing, what you fight
 For then? What you defending?
 You believe like, like they believe so

³⁰⁴ McCraney, *Choir Boy*, 79.

³⁰⁵ McCraney, *Choir Boy*, 88.

What you fight for?³⁰⁶

Pharus has spent the entire play fighting, but it has not mattered – none of his success has managed to have an effect on the people who are determined to dislike him for who he is no matter what he does. (Pharus vocalizes this concern earlier in the play as well when he complains to AJ “I been doing great. It only seem good because everybody always want me to do bad. / All the great I got get diminished.”)³⁰⁷ The dejected Pharus, who has asked the Headmaster at various times whether he would prefer to be feared or respected, complains, “I can’t even make them fear me.”³⁰⁸

He can and did, however, make some of them love him. AJ expresses to the Headmaster that he has noticed the way Pharus is ashamed of the things people call him but has never intervened with Pharus. Alone in their room the night before graduation, he does; AJ offers to trim Pharus’ hair after he mentions that his mother complained about its length. Pharus opens up about why he will not go into barbershops, sharing a story about being a child and being told to get his hair cut because he was “looking too pretty,” then going to the barbershop with a friend. When he reminded his friend of his mother’s instruction for his haircut, the little boy called him a homophobic slur. Pharus describes being a small child and looking at the adult men in the barbershop “looking at me like, ‘That’s right.’ / Like, ‘That’s what you get.’ / Like they were all with him and not no one...”³⁰⁹ He explains that he never felt like he was accepted anywhere until

³⁰⁶ McCraney, *Choir Boy*, 106.

³⁰⁷ McCraney, *Choir Boy*, 36.

³⁰⁸ McCraney, *Choir Boy*, 107.

³⁰⁹ McCraney, *Choir Boy*, 127.

he got to Drew and “had space to let me be,” but after the beating called particular attention to his Otherness he feels like “everybody looking at me like, ‘That’s what you get.’”³¹⁰

The monologue (along with the monologue in the shower) is the most Pharus self-discloses throughout the play, allowing himself to be vulnerable with his roommate about a lifetime of struggling for the right simply to be himself. He describes cycles of being ostracized for who he was, of thinking he had friends or social support, and then losing them as a result of homophobia. AJ listens, then takes action: he invites Pharus to share his bed, offering comfort and (platonic) affection. “That’s what you get,” he says, suggesting that Pharus deserves people who care deeply for him whether or not they share his identity.³¹¹ AJ’s acceptance of Pharus does not impugn his own heterosexuality, but it *does* invite him into the performance of a new kind of masculinity, which Ward suggests will be the beneficial result of reducing anxieties around appearing gay in the Black Church:

[A] mutually validating intimacy between black heterosexual males might normalise and sanction a deeply-needed, more positive construction of masculinity that might easily incorporate vulnerability and intimacy, as well as strength. It would have consequences for male health and well-being.³¹²

By the play’s end, Pharus has not yet made decisions about how he will take on the world to find community, but AJ offers the hope that community can and will find him. Together – through Pharus’ successful performance of faith even as a queer man, through AJ’s ability to empathize with his friend without feeling threatened – the boys offer hope that a more tolerant community could find the audience without threatening closely-held values.

³¹⁰ McCraney, *Choir Boy*, 127.

³¹¹ McCraney, *Choir Boy*, 128.

³¹² Ward, 500 - 501.

The final new song in the play is sung as the boys dress for graduation. “I Got Rainbow Tied Round My Shoulder” is a spiritual that ends with the boys singing:

I got a rainbow
Tied around my shoulder,
Mama say come home,
My Lord son, come home.³¹³

Pharus singing the final “I got a rainbow” before the other boys join in for the ending brings to mind the double meanings of rainbows in the current cultural context as a symbol of the LGBTQ community and as a Christian symbol marking God’s promise.³¹⁴ As the boys anticipate coming into the adult world that will be their homes for the rest of their lives, there is no friction between the two.

The Prom (2018)

The most recent musical in this chapter, *The Prom*, ran on Broadway in the Longacre Theatre from October 23, 2018 to August 11, 2019. *The Prom* has a book by Bob Martin, book and lyrics by Chad Beguelin, and music by Matthew Sklar. The musical’s concept, created by Jack Viertel, is loosely based on a series of real-world events in which students were barred from taking same-sex partners to their high school proms.³¹⁵ The musical tells the story of four Broadway performers who, seeking a career boost, look for a charitable cause to champion and

³¹³ McCraney, *Choir Boy*, 131.

³¹⁴ In Christian mythology, God sent a rainbow to Noah and the other people who were on the arc during the Great Flood that destroyed the world as a promise never to destroy the world with water again.

³¹⁵ Jesse Green, “‘The Prom’ Review: Bringing Jazz Hands to the Heartland,” *The New York Times*, November 15, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/15/theater/the-prom-review.html?smid=tw-nytimesarts&smtyp=cur>.

decide to intervene in the Twitter-trending story of an Indiana lesbian whose entire prom was canceled as a result of her desire to bring a girl as her date. The quartet and their publicist travel to Edgewater, IN, where the lesbian teen (Emma) is trying to take her closeted girlfriend (Alyssa) to the prom and has been blocked by a homophobic PTA. At first, the Broadway stars seem to make everything worse – they burst in right when Emma and the principal nearly have the PTA convinced to reverse their decision to cancel prom and destroy the progress made so far, incensing the PTA president (Mrs. Green, Alyssa’s mother) to the point that the PTA responds to public and legal pressure to have a prom Emma can attend by having one prom for her at the school and hosting a second, secret prom for the rest of the student body elsewhere. Eventually, though, Emma and the actors become friends. They help her build her confidence and, once she finds her own way to address the community’s attitude towards her sexuality (through a viral online video), fund an inclusive prom that everyone can attend. Alyssa comes out to her mother in front of the whole student body and she and Emma finally get to share a dance.

The plot is largely frothy and fun, with both visual and aural elements of the production making reference to musical comedies rather than gritty contemporary musical theatre. There is certainly value in reaching a cultural moment where LGBTQ young people are present enough in entertainment that not every musical including them needs to be a heavy-handed plea for tolerance. In choosing to include a religiously-motivated homophobic community as a point of conflict without devoting sufficient stage time to interrogating those views in a nuanced way, however, the musical’s creators chose to reinscribe harmful narratives about the incompatibility of queer and religious identities (if not of the possibility of religious tolerance for queerness).

Small-Town Religion

The Prom, critic David Rooney asserts, “points toward a generational shift in LGBTQ acceptance, providing upbeat acknowledgment of the capacity for open-mindedness among today's youth even in churchy communities.”³¹⁶ Rooney’s statement assumes that “Indiana,” “churchy,” and “homophobic” are synonymous, an assumption the musical makes clear that the Broadway performers share. As the quartet chooses Emma as the cause célèbre to jumpstart their failing careers, they sing about how they will teach “compassion” and “better fashion” to

ALL: Those
 BARRY: Fist pumping
 DEE DEE: Bible thumping
 TRENT: Spam-eating
 ANGIE: Cousin-humping
 BARRY: Cow-tipping
 DEE DEE: Shoulder-slumping
 TRENT: Tea bagging
 ANGIE: Jesus-jumping
 ALL: losers and their inbred wives.³¹⁷

Though the song is sung by characters who are written to be intentionally over-the-top and foreshadows those characters learning to view (at least some of) the Indiana residents more complexly, that complexity never quite extends to faith. *The Prom* is not always openly contemptuous of religion; sometimes it is condescending towards it. The musical does not feature scenes of communal worship in a church setting or depict characters in prayer that offer audience members opportunities to connect with the characters; religious characters coded as

³¹⁶ David Rooney, “‘The Prom’: Theater Review,” *Hollywood Reporter*, November 15, 2018, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/the-prom-theater-1161145?utm_source=twitter&utm_source=t.co&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=t.co&utm_medium=referral.

³¹⁷ Martin, Beguelin, and Sklar, 13 – 14.

heterosexual are consistently homophobic, and neither of the potentially-religious queer characters (Barry is Jewish and Alyssa mentions attending Bible camp) are part of the musical's explicit discussion about the potential coexistence of queerness and faith.

Instead of challenging the idea that queerness and faith are unable to coexist within an individual or community by proving that QPoF have always been present in the community, *The Prom* invites queerness from without (in the form of the Broadway visitors, but also the LGBT teens who come to the inclusive prom) and positions faith as something to be displaced or reasoned away. The single song that explicitly offers communal engagement with theology offers a useful example of the fact that merely mentioning a community's religious beliefs in the context of queerness does not necessarily create a site for engaging in communal memory; on the contrary, religious material that is not thoughtfully engaged has the potential to be less effective than ignoring religious content altogether.

Young QPoF (Or the Lack Thereof)

Still, the Broadway stars are right in some ways – the people of Edgewater, IN *do* generally identify as Christians and express the assumption that all the other Edgewater residents share their faith...all, that is, except Emma. Reviewer Jesse Green pointed out that the character Emma is written as “something of a blank,” while *The Daily Beast*'s Tim Teeman points out that she fulfills the near-requirement of token queer characters in small towns to be “sweet, open-hearted, and ‘just like you, OK?’;” Emma is the “normal” character in the musical, a sympathetic anchor for the audience in a sea of larger-than-life showbiz personalities and caricatures of

small-town people.³¹⁸ It is telling that this Everygirl seems completely untouched by religion either as a source of comfort or guilt given its entrenchment in her community. She never references religion in any way (aside from one moment that seems closer to a figure of speech than confirmation or denial of personal beliefs – in “Just Breathe,” she sings, “say namaste and pray it works,” referencing her ongoing attempt to use breathing techniques to calm herself down before the PTA meeting).³¹⁹ In this musical, then, being “normal” means not having a religious identity. In choosing not to have their protagonist engage with religion at all, *The Prom*’s creators cast religion as something that gets in the way of being oneself rather than a potential element of one’s identity.

This attitude is also reflected in Alyssa (Emma’s love interest and the musical’s young QPoF). Alyssa is the only queer character who mentions participating in a communal religious activity. In a list of ways she has worked to please her mother (offered as a reason for why she feels unable to come out) Alyssa sings, “You’ll have Bible camp each summer / to keep you pure and clean.”³²⁰ There is no reflection on what happened there, how she feels about it, or what other young people joined her; the audience is supposed to assume that Bible camp is oppressive and is specifically calculated to suppress young people’s sexualities. Alyssa does not reflect having a personal faith practice or experiencing faith-based conflict around her identity; her religious affiliation is not an important part of her identity.

³¹⁸ Green, “The Prom,”; Tim Teeman, “The Prom’ on Broadway Shows the Limitations of LGBT Stories on Stage,” *The Daily Beast*, November 16, 2018, https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-prom-on-broadway-shows-the-limitations-of-lgbt-stories-on-stage?source=articles&via=rss&utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter.

³¹⁹ Martin, Beguelin, and Sklar, 18.

³²⁰ Martin, Beguelin, and Sklar, 82.

“Love Thy Neighbor”

Given that neither of the young queer people being oppressed are oppressed on religious grounds (nobody specifically says anything about Emma’s queerness being in opposition to their religious beliefs – Mrs. Greene just says that some people who are “offended by her life choices”) nor struggling with religiously-based dissonance around their own identities, it is somewhat incongruous that the major turning point in teen public opinion occurs as a result of an appeal based on scripture.³²¹

Trent Oliver (who is recognizable for a brief stint on a 1990s television show, “Talk to the Hand”) meets the youth of Edgewater outside the 7-Eleven. He attempts to connect with the gathered teenagers to close the “ideological divide between” them (while insulting their town and lack of drama program). The following conversation transpires:

TRENT: And why do you hate homosexuals?

KAYLEE: Hey! I’m a good person! Right, Shelby?

SHELBY: We all are.

FIRST STUDENT: We go to church.

FIFTH STUDENT: We’re Christians.³²²

Oliver (who was able to transport the Broadway stars to Indiana courtesy of the tour bus of the non-equity tour of *Godspell*, with which he is touring as Jesus) explains that he has played Jesus in multiple productions: “*Godspell*, last year’s Hallmark Easter special (that was animated), and *Temptation!*: a stage musical based on The Last Temptation of Christ,” adding that he has “been crucified three times; twelve if you include the reviews.”³²³ This brief statement foreshadows the song to follow. Oliver is intending to lend legitimacy to his opinions on the students’ religious

³²¹ Martin, Beguelin, and Sklar, 62.

³²² Martin, Beguelin, and Sklar, 76.

³²³ Martin, Beguelin, and Sklar, 76.

practices through his connection with the person they worship (“I got to know J.C.”).³²⁴ While the tactic seems to work at least a bit on the teenagers in the musical, it potentially sets audience members who share the teens’ faith system up to be dubious of whatever Oliver is about to say.

In his study of works of theatre depicting the Bible on the Broadway stage, Bial proposes that those shows that succeeded did so through an effective blend of “spectacle, sincerity, authenticity, and irony,” ideally balancing spectacle and authenticity, sincerity and irony in a way that avoided offending religious theatregoers and boring or offending nonreligious audience members.³²⁵ In “Love Thy Neighbor” and the surrounding scene, *The Prom* is firmly on the side of spectacle and irony, with little authenticity or sincerity to offer balance. Oliver’s statement about the shows in which he performed is funny, but the temptation of Christ is not a particularly humorous source for musical inspiration for many audience members. That is doubly true for those who recognize that the show is an adaptation of the novel/movie *The Last Temptation of Christ*, which was widely protested by faith-based organizations when it came out and is, therefore, not likely to be seen as a legitimate source of knowledge of the Jesus in whom most of the townspeople believe.³²⁶

Oliver’s status as a messenger of Jesus is already dubious, then, when he proclaims “I don’t believe [Jesus] hated anyone, let alone gays.”³²⁷ It is reasonable to think that most people who find the list of largely fictional, intentionally irreverent Bible-based musicals funny would

³²⁴ Martin, Beguelin, and Sklar, 76.

³²⁵ Martin, Beguelin, and Sklar, 27.

³²⁶ PBS, “Martin Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation of Christ*,” Culture Shock: Flashpoints, n.d., <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/cultureshock/flashpoints/theater/lasttemptation.html>.

³²⁷ Martin, Beguelin, and Sklar, 77.

agree with the notion that Jesus did not hate gay people (to the extent that they feel Jesus' opinion is a rational yardstick against which to measure one's own opinion at all). Those who are not amused, however, may well be predisposed to be suspicious of any religiously informed message Oliver offers rather than being receptive to the musical's apologetics.

The conversation that immediately follows unfolds predictably. One of the students immediately fires back with, "But the Bible says homosexuality is wrong. And we follow the Bible."³²⁸ Oliver points out that there are rules in the Bible they fail to follow, accusing them of "cherry-pick[ing]."³²⁹ The students deny the accusation and Oliver breaks into song, singing "Love Thy Neighbor." The song begins with Oliver pointing out the ways that the young people are, indeed, failing to conform to Mosaic Law (the list of rules and behavioral guidelines in the Torah, known to the Christian Indianans as the first five books of the Old Testament): Kaylee would be going to hell courtesy of her small tattoo and Shelby would be stoned to death for having sex outside of marriage. Once the students are suitably shocked, Oliver pivots:

Or we could use some common sense instead
when you're lost it always helps recalling
those immortal words that Jesus said
there's one rule that trumps them all:
love thy neighbor.³³⁰

Shelby immediately comes around, realizing they have been unfairly unkind to Emma and that "maybe she was always gay" rather than suddenly choosing it.³³¹ Oliver confirms that "that's how God made her," then continues working on the other students with the backup of the cast of

³²⁸ Martin, Beguelin, and Sklar, 77.

³²⁹ Martin, Beguelin, and Sklar, 77.

³³⁰ Martin, Beguelin, and Sklar, 77.

³³¹ Martin, Beguelin, and Sklar, 78.

the *Godspell* tour, pointing out that a student's remarried mother will need to be put to death and a student prone to masturbation will have to get his hands cut off. This, along with the reminder that "love thy neighbor trumps them all," (the phrase "love thy neighbor" occurs 36 times in the 69 lines of the song) is enough to get all the students on board and cure their homophobia.

The next time the students appear, it is to apologize to Emma and support the creation of an inclusive prom; "they hated [Emma] with a burning passion stoked by centuries of intolerance and a lack of a drama program," but "that guy from 'Talk to the Hand' really opened [their] eyes."³³² They even ask Oliver to stay in Indiana and be their drama teacher.

The resolution is a happy one, but the tactics used to get there support Teeman's assertion that "*The Prom* sees small-town Indiana as an amorphous whole," and not a particularly bright one.³³³ As Teeman points out, it is very strange that the entire community (aside from the principal) is homophobic and transphobic; even the smallest towns hold a variety of points of view. What is even more strange, however, is the musical's supposition that the residents both blindly follow what they believe to be the teachings of the Bible while simultaneously knowing nothing about it, including one of the most famous passages of scripture.

"Not to oversimplify," Oliver says, but that is exactly what the song does.³³⁴ It is not unheard of for communities to operate under their own interpretation of a given religious text that may or may not have anything to do with what the text actually says, either choosing to misinterpret/ignore key tenets or never actually reading the text themselves; *The Prom* could have explored this. It did not. Nor did it sincerely examine living in the tension between

³³² Martin, Beguelin, and Sklar, 101.

³³³ Teeman, "The Prom."

³³⁴ Martin, Beguelin, and Sklar, 78.

seemingly disparate scriptural instructions, offer a conversation about interpreting scripture in its historical context, or question whether religious doctrine was an acceptable source of authority for the policies of a state-sponsored institution.

Any of these, of course, might seem like a tall order for a musical – there are a limited number of words that rhyme with “hermeneutics,” and it is difficult to boil centuries of arguments down into a six-minute song. The problem comes from the fact that *The Prom* seems to suggest Oliver has managed just that, single-handedly solving the problem of religiously-based homophobia with the reminder that Jesus told people to be nice (so any part of their faith system that complicates his version of “nice” can be safely discarded without further interrogation).

Oliver’s current role in *Godspell* is not only a key to legitimacy for his acting career but a useful tool for pinpointing why his attempts at offering a theological argument fall flat. “*Godspell*,” Bial writes, “relies on the trope of the wise fool.”³³⁵ Oliver himself trades on this trope – he is depicted as not being particularly smart, professionally successful, or eloquent, but his bumbling efforts manage to connect with the students of Edgewater in a way nothing else does. “Instead of mocking Jesus, [though, *Godspell*] highlights the fact that Christianity—though we think of it as part of the Establishment—can in fact be a vehicle for social liberation,” Bial explains.³³⁶ *The Prom* does not aim so high. Oliver uses Biblical language to change students’ minds, but he does not actually engage Biblical doctrine in a significant way *or* lay out any kind of nuanced argument. That is not a problem in a musical world where teens’ positive reactions are scripted, but it also fails to offer opportunities for connection or critical thought to real

³³⁵ Bial, 164.

³³⁶ Bial, 164.

religious audience members who might have been open to a more sincerely meant argument engaging a text they hold sacred.

Oliver's examples of "wacky" laws and their outsized consequences are clearly intended to shock the students, but they do not actually reflect laws found in the Bible as he suggests they do. The concept of hell (as Oliver is using the term) does not exist in the Old Testament, and it certainly is not mentioned in Leviticus 19, the only place in the Bible where tattoos are mentioned (in the context of mimicking pagan practices). Cutting off someone's hands is not a prescribed punishment for masturbation (masturbation is not specifically discussed in the Bible outside of a specific, incredibly context-specific story in Genesis, and while the Bible occasionally advocates for the cutting off of hands, that is largely a punishment associated with violent conflict). Divorce and remarriage is not a cause for being put to death; various places in the Bible including Mark 10 do suggest that remarriage after a divorce counts as adultery unless certain qualifications were met for the divorce, but Oliver never stops to get the specifics of the context of the student's parents' divorce. Deuteronomy 22 *does* prescribe the killing of a young woman who married someone while claiming to be a virgin and was later proved not to be, but while her family's honor is potentially forfeited in such a situation their lives are not.

There are plenty of laws in the Bible that would seem equally strange to an uninformed individual in the contemporary cultural context without inventing new ones or misrepresenting their specifics, so it is unclear why Martin and Bueglin made the choice to do so. Perhaps they assume that no one in the audience will be sufficiently informed to know that the "laws" Oliver cites are not real. That would be quite an oversight, considering the country's religious demographics; even if most audience members were not actively religious, the choice risks offending those who are without dramaturgical or political gain. It is possible that the scriptural

Mad Libs is a character choice intended to suggest that Oliver is bluffing or does not know as much as he thinks he does, but that interpretation seems dramaturgically unmotivated; there is no moment of course correction, nor a moment where Oliver congratulates himself for his clever ruse. Perhaps the writers themselves chose not to research the text they were skewering, operating on what they had heard or remembered rather than what was actually written. No matter the reason, the effect is that religious audience members not only have to listen to their faith be ridiculed but ridiculed on false grounds.

This limits the song's potential efficacy as a mode of intervention for audience members. The theory of communal memory forged through communal religious acts would suggest that demonstrated familiarity with their holy text would predispose religious audience members to be willing to identify with Oliver's messaging. However, the combination of claiming to accurately represent the content of a holy text and failing to do so may, instead, distance audience members further than not discussing religion at all. Religious people, Brandon explains, already tend to be suspicious of theatre as a secularizing, amoral influence; doing religion poorly justifies their suspicions.³³⁷

Even Oliver's ultimate thesis, while sounding good, is theologically unsound. According to the Bible (the text Oliver claims to be using as a source for his argument), Jesus *did* say there was one law that was the most important – "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."³³⁸ "Love your neighbor as yourself" is the *second* most important commandment, according to Jesus.³³⁹ This particular passage is one of the best-known

³³⁷ Brandon.

³³⁸ Matthew 22:37, NIV.

³³⁹ Matthew 22:38, NIV.

in the Bible, and hearing it misrepresented repeatedly is likely to be annoying as well as simply confusing.³⁴⁰

It was not necessary for Oliver to appeal to the Bible as a source of authority – the conversations the students have between verses have nothing to do with his theological argument, but rather with the question of empathy. If the creative team wanted to ignore any potential influence of the community members’ faith system on their attitudes, they could have chosen to have Oliver appeal to the teens’ sense of empathy in another way. They did not, and the resulting song is not only dramaturgically but musically ineffective.

In conventional musical theatre structure, a song happens because a character has something so important to say that words are insufficient to say it. While there are many possible song forms, most songs go on a journey of some kind, either offering a more in-depth understanding of a character or situation or helping a character come to a decision or realization.³⁴¹ “Love Thy Neighbor” begins as if it is going to be a conventional AABA song (the most common structure): it opens with a verse and a refrain establishing the premise for the song (the students are not following some of the Law themselves, which would be a big problem if the Bible did not say those were less important than loving one’s neighbor), then offers a second

³⁴⁰ Andy Rau, “The 100 Most Read Bible Verses at Bible Gateway,” *Bible Gateway*, May 5, 2009, <https://www.biblegateway.com/blog/2009/05/the-100-most-read-bible-verses-at-biblegatewaycom/>. In a class discussion about this point, one of my students offered the alternative interpretation that Oliver is suggesting the “all” that “love thy neighbor” trumps consists of the other named laws, not the Law in its entirety. While that interpretation is less theologically unsound, the lack of clarity in the song’s phrasing is still cause for concern, as it does not definitively support either interpretation.

³⁴¹ Jack Viertel, *The Secret Life of the American Musical : How Broadway Shows Are Built*, First edition.. (New York: Sarah Crichton Books, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016), author McMillin Scott, *The Musical as Drama : A Study of the Principles and Conventions behind Musical Shows from Kern to Sondheim* (Princeton University Press, 2006).

musically identical verse and refrain offering more information (in this case, some new sins students are committing). Each of those verse/refrain pairs are A sections of the song.

Conventional structure would then anticipate a B, a musically different section of the song where things change – where, for example, a group of students might interrogate Oliver’s thesis and find that they agree with it, or where Oliver might try a new tactic that works more effectively. A B section would be the place where the creators would justify the students’ change of heart. Instead, “Love Thy Neighbor” moves straight to repetitions of the refrain where students sing with Oliver, signaling their acceptance of his point of view without any musical or dramaturgical reason to justify that acceptance.³⁴²

In his review, David Rooney praised the fact that *The Prom* “taps into the acrimonious national divide between Red and Blue states with a winking wit that lets neither side off the hook for rigid preconceptions.”³⁴³ When it comes to characters of faith, however (and, one can only assume by extension, the audience members of faith from smaller towns who watch them), the Broadway stars face no surprises. They do not discover hidden depths in the “Bible thumping” and “Jesus jumping” small-town community but divert their stream with an easy swipe suggesting faith is not something to be engaged complexly but rather explained away with minimal effort. Affective cultural memories forged through portrayals of communal worship have the potential to create unexpected connections. Treating the faith of small-town communities as a casual problem to solve with minimal effort or efforts towards authenticity,

³⁴² Allison Bergman and Tracey Moore, *Acting the Song: Performance Skills for the Musical Theatre* (Allworth, 2008).

³⁴³ Rooney. “The Prom.”

however, Others those community members further, limiting any hope of finding mutual grace through mutual values.

Resilience and Reception

While the musical's explicit engagement with religion is unsatisfactory, its broader engagement with representational trends of young queer people is more mixed. Though reviews for *The Prom* were generally positive, many problematize the musical's characterization of its teenagers, with critic J. Kelly Nestruck suggesting that the creators had a "struggle to fully realize [the] younger generation. They are either decent to the point of dullness – or stereotypes [that] fade into the background of the actors' antics."³⁴⁴ While reviews uniformly praised Caitlin Kinnunen, the actor who played Emma, several specifically pointed out that the "lesbians" theoretically at the center of the story, especially Emma, were written so safely as to be largely without personality.³⁴⁵ Robert Hoffler of *The Wrap* says, "In their plodding way, Emma and Alyssa make a case for why no one, straight or gay, should be forced to live in Indiana. But need the two girls be so dour and dull?"³⁴⁶

While critics seemed to agree that Emma and Alyssa themselves were not particularly special, that can be interpreted as a victory in a world where "so many queer Broadway

³⁴⁴ J. Kelly Nestruck, "Review: The Prom Hits the Heights of Hilarity as a Spoof of Broadway - but the Kids Aren't All Right," *The Globe and Mail*, November 15, 2018, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/theatre-and-performance/reviews/article-review-the-prom-hits-the-heights-of-hilarity-as-a-spoof-of-broadway/>.

³⁴⁵ Robert Hofler, "'The Prom' Broadway Review: Indiana's Back on the LGBT Chopping Block," *TheWrap*, November 16, 2018, <https://www.thewrap.com/the-prom-broadway-review-musical-lgbt-indiana-bob-martin/>; Nestruck; and Green, for example. It should be noted that Emma specifically self-identifies as a lesbian, but Alyssa never names her orientation.

³⁴⁶ Hofler, "'The Prom.'"

characters are required to be” extraordinary to be worthy of attention.³⁴⁷ After all, the premise of some of the best-loved musicals is that they use the form to elevate normal life moments – a cowboy taking a farming girl to a picnic, a bachelor turning thirty-five, cats being cats – to extraordinary heights. In the above-quoted interview with “Out” magazine, Kinnunen shared her hope that depicting Emma as a very ordinary girl “will usher in a new era of similarly everyday out characters, remarkable for being unremarkable.”³⁴⁸ “Emma’s deepest desire,” Kinnunen expands, “is to get people to believe she is a person.”³⁴⁹

And while most of the characters of the teen ensemble are sketches of characters at best (one student, when asked to describe herself, responds with “I’m a girl. A teenager. I’m a cheerleader”), Emma *does* have a fully developed character that avoids many of the common representational pitfalls, as does Alyssa.³⁵⁰ Emma, specifically, offers a useful example of resilience, engaging each of Craig, et al.’s modes of queer resilience throughout the musical. Coming out is an important part of the narrative but coming out is not portrayed as a cure-all or an action without consequences as Padva cautions against; Emma is living with her grandmother because her parents kicked her out after she came out to them and deals with bullying at school. Emma’s girlfriend spends most of the musical waffling about when and whether she is going to come out; when Emma pressures her to do so, Alyssa pushes back, citing her concerns about her mother’s response. In “Alyssa Greene,” Alyssa outlines a complicated family situation in which

³⁴⁷ Casey Mink, “Caitlin Kinnunen: She Plays the Out Gay Teen Broadway’s Been Waiting For,” *Out*, October 1, 2018, <https://www.out.com/out-exclusives/2018/10/01/caitlin-kinnunen-she-plays-out-gay-teen-broadways-been-waiting>.

³⁴⁸ Mink.

³⁴⁹ Mink.

³⁵⁰ Martin, Beguelin, and Sklar, 67.

her mother enlists her in an effort to be perfect to make up for being a one-parent family, offering a nuanced understanding that there are legitimate fears around coming out even when one's physical safety is not in danger.

Mrs. Greene herself is a nuanced character. Broadway World's Michael Dale notes that "the authors make it clear that she's honestly trying to protect the community's children from people who make 'lifestyle choices' that she doesn't understand," and her response when Alyssa finally comes out reflects that.³⁵¹ "I just don't want you to have a hard life," she tells her daughter, then agrees that they will talk more at home; Alyssa gets to live in the common and rarely portrayed middle ground between violent rejection and enthusiastic acceptance.³⁵²

Neither teen is ever physically aggressed, but Emma *is* bullied at school. Unlike the queer characters McInroy and Craig describe, however, she does not allow herself to be stuck in the role of a victim. Instead, she pushes back, openly calling out the students who hang a stuffed bear in her locker with "lezbo" written on it – "Way to take the high road, guys...I'm pretty sure this breaks a few laws," she points out, then pushes back when they allege that she canceled the prom (since it was actually the PTA that did so.)³⁵³ Emma fights back against not only the students but the PTA itself; while she repeatedly expresses that she does not want the situation to get out of hand, she is willing to speak at the PTA meeting at the principal's request.

³⁵¹ Michael Dale, "BWW Review: Brooks Ashmanskas Gives a Classic Musical Comedy Star Turn in Hilarious and Touching THE PROM," BroadwayWorld.com, November 16, 2018, <https://www.broadwayworld.com/article/BWW-Review-Brooks-Ashmanskas-Gives-a-Classic-Musical-Comedy-Star-Turn-in-Hilarious-and-Touching-THE-PROM-20181116>.

³⁵² Martin, Beguelin, and Sklar, 102.

³⁵³ Martin, Beguelin, and Sklar, 15.

Unlike Meyer's pamphlet-pushing vision of principals, Mr. Hawkins is a strong advocate for his student, working with Emma and the State Attorney to build a case to push the PTA to reinstate the prom. Mr. Hawkins is straight, but he is explicitly supportive of Emma and Alyssa throughout the musical.

The Prom also sidesteps some of the racial problems of representation McInroy and Craig cite as being commonplace in media focused on LGBTQ narratives. Like *bare*, *The Prom* shows an African American authority figure working to support a white protagonist. Where Sister Chantelle's statement that "there's a black woman inside the soul of every gay man" problematically positions white gay men in a position to identify with and hold some degree of authority over the black female experience, *The Prom* specifically slaps aside the suggestion that the experiences of sexually- and racially-motivated oppression are interchangeable. (After the principal says the State's Attorney feels that the canceled prom is a civil rights violation, Emma asks, "So what are you saying: I'm a gay, white Rosa Parks?" Mr. Hawkins says, "No. I am absolutely not saying that.")³⁵⁴

That is not to say that *The Prom* is without its racial shortcomings. The cast of queer characters that appear at the end of the musical is racially diverse, and while Alyssa's race is unspecified, the Broadway originator of the role (Isabelle McCalla) is biracial. The musical's "designated out queer characters," however, were all cast as white on Broadway – Emma and Barry are white, as are all the Broadway stars who come to town to attempt to help the cause, creating a narrative for much of the show that queerness is white. The musical also relies on cheap humor around cultural appropriation in "You Happened," when a white student asks another white student to prom with a reference to Spanish class complete with a large sombrero

³⁵⁴ Martin, Beguelin, and Sklar, 17.

and Anglicized pronunciation of Spanish words. The result is that, aside from the African American principal, characters of color feel incidental to the world of the musical rather than a necessary part of it.

The musical does not completely attempt to escape conversations about race, but Emma *does* use escapism as a coping mechanism. In her first song, “Just Breathe,” Emma tries hard to think about anything but the PTA meeting into which she is about to walk, coaching herself to visualize better realities – “picture a beach with golden sand,” she sings, and “picture a Xanax in your hand.”³⁵⁵ At that moment she also considers literally escaping, fantasizing about going to the Greyhound station and taking a bus away from her problems. Escape is also a place of common ground for Emma and Alyssa, who both frequently literally escape together to steal one-on-one moments and sing about the desire to escape and enjoy each other’s company in a world without the judgment of their peers – “I just wanna dance with you / let the whole world melt away / and dance with you,” the girls sing.³⁵⁶ It is important, however, that Emma and Alyssa are not actually trapped waiting for a whole new world, victims of fate and circumstance as Daniel Marshall finds that queer youth are often depicted; by the end of the musical, the fantasy becomes reality, the prom full of both same- and differently-gendered couples reprising the girls’ song.³⁵⁷

There is, however, most of a musical between those two moments. The institution of Emma’s high school is not able to offer protection from the situation and Emma does not seek

³⁵⁵ Martin, Beguelin, and Sklar, 17.

³⁵⁶ Martin, Beguelin, and Sklar, 29.

³⁵⁷ Daniel Marshall, “Popular Culture, the ‘Victim’ Trope and Queer Youth Analytics,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 23, no. 1 (January 1, 2010): 65–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390903447176>.

adult intervention with the other high schoolers – just the matters of policy that the adults are deciding – but she does find strength partly through her interactions with the adult out-of-towners. Angie (a long-term member of the ensemble of *Chicago*) teaches Emma how to Fosse her way through any situation. DeeDee (one of the actors who got the bad reviews at the beginning of the musical) works to get Emma a spot on an important television program to raise awareness of the situation, though Emma eventually chooses not to take it. Most significantly, Barry (the openly gay actor in the Broadway quartette) and Emma become fast friends as he helps her dress for prom, then she eventually invites him as her date to the inclusive prom the Broadway actors sponsor.

McInroy and Craig and Padva all problematize stereotypical representations of queer gender performance, citing a tendency for queer people to fall along clearly marked butch/femme lines, with both men and women trending towards either “hyper-masculine or hyper-feminine” gender performance.³⁵⁸ Just as Alexander Dhoest and Nele Simons’ interviewees complained about the tendency for depictions of same-sex couples to either be very oversexualized or completely desexualized without a more realistic middle ground, however, it seems that eliding the realities of femme gay men and butch gay women would be as much a failure of representation as relying *exclusively* on those stereotypes.³⁵⁹ Emma is a soft butch with a personal aesthetic Chris Jones describes as “geeky,” drives a truck, and is thoroughly unoffended by either Barry’s teasing about that fact or description of her as “butchie” – it is just an adjective,

³⁵⁸ McInroy and Craig.

³⁵⁹ Dhoest and Simons.

not an insult.³⁶⁰ Emma plays dress-up with dresses and even lets Barry talk her into one to go to the prom the first time (when the PTA changed the venue behind her back), but she wears the vintage tux of her dreams to the inclusive prom.

Barry, in contrast, is terrifically femme, carrying a makeup bag and joking about loaning Emma his Spanx; Barry's flamboyancy, Rooney reports, "goes so far over the top he comes out the other side as a flesh-and-blood, deeply human individual. With empathy."³⁶¹ Barry seems utterly at home with who he is and is eventually able to offer Emma space to be her queer self in turn, with all the in-group teasing and irreverence that entails. It *is* strange that Barry initially attempts to enroll Emma in normative femininity, talking her into a dress for the first prom, and stranger still that Emma never pushes back on this implied disapproval; instead, she is uncritically approving of Barry for the majority of the musical. While it is nice to see a man with a feminine gender expression played as more than a joke, *The Prom* misses an opportunity to have a more nuanced conversation about intra-community enforcement of respectability politics in the queer community. (Alyssa is also conventionally feminine, but it is unclear how much of her personal aesthetic is dictated by her mother and what is her own choice. Regardless, she does not fall into the passive, shy stereotype McInroy and Craig suggest is common in portrayals of queer femme characters; she is frequently frozen into inaction around the issue of coming out, but she is portrayed as influential in her social group.)

³⁶⁰ Chris Jones, "REVIEW: Broadway Saves Indiana in 'The Prom,' a Savvy, Self-Aware and Consistently Funny New Musical of Liberal Longing," *The Daily News*, December 15, 2018, <https://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/broadway/ny-ent-the-prom-broadway-review-1019-story.html>; Martin, Beguelin, and Sklar, 52.

³⁶¹ Rooney, "'The Prom.'"

Emma is able to discover some of the broader queer community through her relationship with Barry. The strength she gains through her relationships with the New Yorkers equips her to take control of the situation herself, finding and fostering a community of LGBTQ Indianans her own age by recording a song about her experience (“Unruly Heart”) and posting it to an online video sharing website where it goes viral. Young queer people often rely on online spaces for representation and community, particularly those who are otherwise socially isolated; “Unruly Heart” depicts the kind of community they can discover.³⁶² Lyrically, the song calls to mind (and nearly quotes) *La Cage Aux Folles*’ famous song of self-acceptance “I Am What I Am,” with the characters stating who they are clearly and decisively:

No matter what the world might say
 This heart is the best part of me
 So fear’s all in the past
 Fading so fast
 I won’t stay hidden anymore
 I’m who I am
 And I think that’s worth fighting for
 And nobody out there
 Ever gets to define
 The life I’m meant to lead
 With this unruly heart of mine.³⁶³

While the lyrical content and action of self-acceptance are similar, however, “Unruly Heart” has some notable differences. First, Emma is not alone – she initially records the song by herself in her bedroom, but the lyrics are interspersed with comments of encouragement from people all over the internet who join her and sing with her; she ends the song surrounded by people who share her experiences. Secondly, the music of “I Am Who I Am” is driving, picking up

³⁶² McInroy and Craig.

³⁶³ Martin, Beguelin, and Sklar, 91.

momentum as Albin fights to make his point, melody and accompaniment swerving around each other until they fall into place at the end of the song, Albin finally believing his own words and his own worth. “Unruly Heart” is a pure ballad – not an argument, but a statement of fact, Emma’s melody fitting neatly into the accompaniment from the very beginning; it is syncopated at times but in a way consistent with a contemporary pop aesthetic rather than creating tension between melody and accompaniment. Albin belongs to a world where his equality with straight society is far from a given, even to his husband; Emma knows she is on the right side of history and simply needs her community to catch up. When the other teenagers join her, they sing with her in lush, easy harmony, a wall of sound staking their claim to their right to be in the world.

Conversations about publicly visible queerness, particularly queer representation in media often billed or expected to be family-friendly, often circle back to the need to “think of the children,” protecting impressionable minds from exposure to unsuitable content.³⁶⁴ Critic Jesse Green notes that “anti-gay intolerance offers a comfortable target and a teachable moment” for the musical, but *The Prom*’s Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade performance reveals that it is still a relevant lesson. At the parade, the company performed “Time to Dance,” the musical’s finale. The song takes place at the inclusive prom the Broadway performers engineered and features couples of various gender compositions dancing together, ending with Emma and Alyssa kissing; the performance was the first same-sex kiss in the history of the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade.³⁶⁵ The segment inspired strong reactions online, particularly on Twitter; some parents

³⁶⁴ Meyer, “‘I’m Just Trying.’”

³⁶⁵ Malcolm Venable, “The Macy’s Parade Featured a Same-Sex Kiss and It Started a Twitter War | TV Guide,” TVGuide.com, November 23, 2018, <https://www.tvguide.com/news/macys-parade-same-sex-kiss-controversy/>.

were upset that a same-sex kiss was aired without warning on network television, forcing them to have conversations about homosexuality with their children. Conservative social media collective ForAmerica echoed the sentiments of many homophobic conservative Twitter users when they tweeted “Millions of small children just watched two girls kiss and had their innocence broken this morning. @nbc and @Macys just blindsided parents who expected this to be a family program, so they could push their agenda on little kids.

#macysthanksgivingdayparade #MacysDayParade.”³⁶⁶

Other Twitter users celebrated the kiss, particularly as a triumph of representation for closeted queer young people. Twitter user @lizzsoileau wrote, “I’m most thankful for the [#MacysParade](#) performance from The Prom. It just warms my heart thinking of all the homophobic family members are out there pissing themselves over it. This is a win for all the queer kids who can’t come out to their families this Thanksgiving ❤️”³⁶⁷ Various news outlets reported on the controversy, but they also referenced the historicity and importance of the kiss

³⁶⁶ ForAmerica, “Millions of Small Children Just Watched Two Girls Kiss and Had Their Innocence Broken This Morning. @nbc and @Macys Just Blindsided Parents Who Expected This to Be a Family Program, so They Could Push Their Agenda on Little Kids. #macysthanksgivingdayparade #MacysDayParade Pic.Twitter.Com/EmCLSfNmAj,” Tweet, @ForAmerica (blog), November 22, 2018, https://twitter.com/ForAmerica/status/1065623392072675328?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1065623392072675328&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fpeople.com%2Ftheater%2Fthe-prom-musical-thanksgiving-day-parade-same-sex-kiss%2F.

³⁶⁷ lizzsoileau, “I’m Most Thankful for the #MacysParade Performance from The Prom. It Just Warms My Heart Thinking of All the Homophobic Family Members Are out There Pissing Themselves over It. This Is a Win for All the Queer Kids Who Can’t Come out to Their Families This Thanksgiving ❤️,” Twitter, @lizzsoileau (blog), November 22, 2018, https://twitter.com/lizzsoileau/status/1065632133593600000?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1065632133593600000&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Ffew.com%2Ftheater%2F2018%2F11%2F22%2Fthe-prom-macys-thanksgiving-day-parade-first-same-sex-kiss%2F.

itself.³⁶⁸ On “The View,” conservative co-host Meghan McCain applauded *The Prom* for representing “the young LGBT person in the middle of the country who maybe doesn’t see themselves reflected all the time” because “it’s important to have yourself reflected.”³⁶⁹

Emma and Alyssa fall prey to the representational trope of desexualized queer women – after dating for over a year they share a single kiss during the entire production, placed at the end of the musical in a celebratory moment as if they are only beginning a relationship.³⁷⁰ None of their stolen moments under bleachers or in hallways involve more than significant hand-holding even as their straight peers openly display physical affection in much more public settings – straight girls get to fantasize about making “the boys get overheated” and whether people will want to “do [them]”; for queer women, being able to dance together is “more than [they] dared wish for.”³⁷¹

Media coverage of the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade suggests that the representation offered by *The Prom* was more than many young queer people dared wish for, and it is important and exciting that LGBTQ young people have a musical to enjoy where characters who look and love like them get an unambiguously happy ending. It would have been even better, however, if that ending had also empowered viewers to dare to wish for a world where they deserve the same

³⁶⁸ E.g. Lee Moran, “Conservative Group Rants About Same-Sex Kiss At Macy’s Parade, Twitter Reacts With Love,” HuffPost, November 23, 2018, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/conservative-group-gets-shredded-over-macys-same-sex-kiss-criticism_n_5bf7f08ee4b0eb6d930dc92c, Claire Spellberg, “‘The View’ Tackles Macy’s Parade Same-Sex Kiss Controversy: ‘Is It Such a Big Deal, Really?’,” *Decider* (blog), November 26, 2018, <https://decider.com/2018/11/26/the-view-macys-parade-same-sex-kiss-controversy/>.

³⁶⁹ Spellberg.

³⁷⁰ Dhoest and Simons.

³⁷¹ Martin, Beguelin, and Sklar, 54, 107.

interesting, affectionate relationships as their straight peers, or where the adults in their lives are able to handle nuanced conversations about the complexities of their identities.

Conclusion

Both pieces in this chapter feature protagonists with more socially successful and more deeply closeted partners or former partners, both include a diegetic musical performance near the end (Emma's "Unruly Heart" video, the graduation at the end of *Choir Boy*), and both protagonists find their way in part due to the relationships they cultivate with others. Both musicals center their narrative on a resilient queer teen who moved from nervous isolation to a place of community and strength. Neither Pharus, David, nor Alyssa explicitly identifies as gay or lesbian, and the possibility of a nonmonosexual identity (bisexual, pansexual, queer, etc.) is not raised for any of them or any other characters. None of the musicals have nonbinary or trans characters or characters who are explicitly written as differently-abled; the diversity of the worlds is limited to race and sexual orientation. In spite of these similarities, *The Prom* and *Choir Boy* engage queerness and faith in markedly different ways.

The Prom seems to find faith to be an impediment to an authentic queer life that must be overcome but avoids any meaningful engagement with faith as a potential source of identity, hope, or good in characters' lives. Religion becomes an inconvenience in *The Prom*, and the resulting lack of meaningful engagement with theology or religious practices (and, indeed, the sometimes directly inaccurate use of what religious material is present) will likely limit its viability as a coalition-building tool. *Choir Boy* delves deeply into the spiritual, political, and aural world of the African American faith community to whom McCraney has addressed the piece, resulting in a more nuanced piece of theatre that also requires additional processing power on the part of the audience.

Importantly, however, both *Choir Boy* and *The Prom* offered adolescent and emergent adult audience members complex, nuanced portrayals of queer adolescents that were not accessible to them before, honoring queer young people as individuals with their own agency and their own lives to learn to live. Both of the pieces in the chapter end at a rite of passage from youth to emergent adulthood – graduation and prom – in which the protagonists have a chance to anticipate the world into which they are entering. Perhaps Nestruck is right and “the kids aren’t all right,” but the way these musicals end looking forward offers hope that they will be.³⁷²

³⁷² Nestruck.

Chapter 3: “Taking the Holy Word and Adding Fiction”: Commercially Successful Musical Adaptations

The first half of this dissertation examined contemporary musicals (spanning the new millennium and the life of the subgenre of musicals featuring young QPoF) in high school settings. Those musicals' depictions of the contemporary adolescent experience allow them to be in dialogue with said experience in specific ways that offer young people and their families multiple points of access to the narrative. Furthermore, all musicals previously discussed are (to varying degrees of effectiveness) actively engaged in the process of advocating for acceptance of young QPoF, or at least young queer people.

The reason musicals offer an interesting object of study as a vehicle for both shaping and disseminating cultural narratives, however, is because they are a popular form, and popularity – at least in the commercial theatre space of Broadway – is denoted by box office dollars. *The Color Purple*, *Spring Awakening*, and *The Book of Mormon* were all on Broadway during the same period as the previously discussed shows, sharing stories of young QPoF in other settings to the tune of (at the time of writing) over a billion Broadway box office dollars (in comparison

to the roughly 29 million represented by *The Prom* and *Choir Boy*'s Broadway productions).³⁷³

While I do not suggest that a musical's ultimate value is in its earning ability (box office figures do not, for example, capture consumer engagement through listening to music, watching videos, reading librettos, or viewing and participating in regional productions), in this chapter I am particularly interested in the box office viability of queerness in these musicals' specific socio-cultural contexts across the first two decades of the 2000s.

Spring Awakening, *The Book of Mormon*, and *The Color Purple* share several traits that most of the other musicals in this dissertation do not. First, they are not original stories, but adaptations of well-respected works of literature and drama: *The Color Purple* is an eponymous musicalization of Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize-winning 1982 novel, *The Book of Mormon* draws on *The Book of Mormon* (though it is not actually an adaptation of it), and *Spring Awakening* adapts Frank Wedekind's popular 1891 play, sometimes also translated from the German as

³⁷³ Grosses in opening order: *The Color Purple* 2005 (over \$103,000,000), *Spring Awakening* 2006 (over \$57,441,834), *The Book of Mormon* 2011 (\$647,327,252 as of December 2019), *The Color Purple* 2015 (\$148,718,479), *Spring Awakening* 2015 (\$66,623,990), *The Prom* 2018 (\$25,012,263), *Choir Boy* 2019 (\$3,854,430). BWW News Desk, "'The Color Purple' Fades, to Close on Broadway Feb.24," BroadwayWorld.com, January 24, 2008, <https://www.broadwayworld.com/article/The-Color-Purple-Fades-to-Close-on-Broadway-Feb24-20080124>; "Spring Awakening Broadway @ Eugene O'Neill Theatre - Tickets and Discounts | Playbill," Playbill, accessed December 30, 2019, <http://www.playbill.com/production/spring-awakening-eugene-oneill-theatre-vault-0000004687>; The Broadway League, "THE BOOK OF MORMON Broadway Grosses," BroadwayWorld.com, accessed December 30, 2019, <https://www.broadwayworld.com/grosses/THE-BOOK-OF-MORMON>; The Broadway League, "THE COLOR PURPLE Broadway Grosses," BroadwayWorld.com, accessed December 30, 2019, <https://www.broadwayworld.com/grosses/THE-COLOR-PURPLE>; The Broadway League, "SPRING AWAKENING Broadway Grosses," BroadwayWorld.com, accessed December 30, 2019, <https://www.broadwayworld.com/grosses/SPRING-AWAKENING>; The Broadway League, "THE PROM Broadway Grosses," BroadwayWorld.com, accessed December 30, 2019, <https://www.broadwayworld.com/grosses/THE-PROM>; The Broadway League, "CHOIR BOY Broadway Grosses," BroadwayWorld.com, accessed December 30, 2019, <https://www.broadwayworld.com/grosses/CHOIR-BOY>.

Spring's Awakening (and also engages an alt-rock musical form rarely previously used in musical theatre).³⁷⁴ Their status as adaptations likely deserves partial credit for their box office successes given that some audience members probably attended the musicals due to their familiarity with the shows' source materials. I do not engage the specifics of the adaptive process for these musicals – my project is exploring the potential received meanings of the musicals themselves, and it is not reasonable to expect that all audience members would have prior knowledge of the specifics of the source material. (I do not, however, dismiss reviews that discuss the quality of the musicals' adaptations, as those reviews *are* available to the broader public.)

These musicals also take place in distant times and/or places: 19th century Germany, early-mid 20th century Georgia, and contemporary Uganda. Creating a narrative in a different time or place intended for consumption in one specific time and place can allow creators to engage in an allegorical commentary on contemporary society without risking the same kind of backlash that a more pointed contemporary narrative might threaten, but the same choice can also be made in an attempt to avoid contemporary social politics altogether, maximizing audience and minimizing potential controversy. While each of the musicals in this chapter engages issues relevant to current society in some way, it is telling that – in spite of all three musicals including undeniably queer characters – only one musical (*The Book of Mormon*)

³⁷⁴ *Head Over Heels*, featured in the next chapter, is also an adaptation; however, while the prose poem from which it is adapted is a work of literature, it certainly is not as well known as works like *The Color Purple* or *The Book of Mormon*. Likewise, the other time and place in which it takes place in a fictional place at an unspecified past time, unlike the real times and places featured in the musicals in this chapter. It also did not share the box office success of these musicals.

names queerness, and even that naming involves a character denying his queer identity in a winking way clearly intended to convey to the audience that he *is* gay.

The most conventional, most commercially successful musicals in this dissertation do not engage contemporary queerness and barely name queer identity at all. It is impossible to say whether this omission is related to their success, but it *does* allow the musical narratives to claim a certain universalism that those packaged as specifically queer cannot. The musicals in this chapter wield this power in three distinct ways: on one end of the scale, *The Color Purple* engages a culturally specific theology to depict a faith that benefits from an ability to love (romantically or otherwise) all people including oneself, offering queerness as one possible manifestation of such love. This musical can be interpreted as performing activist work even without naming queer identities. On one end of the continuum of this performance, *Spring Awakening* includes queerness as one of many journeys of sexuality young people face, deliberately neither setting its queer characters apart nor erasing their developmentally normal experimentations. On the other, *The Book of Mormon* explicitly names queerness but does so in a way that suggests that LGBTQ identities are inherently funny and outside the realm of "normal" life (even while criticizing the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints for doing the same).

The Color Purple (2005, 2015)

The Color Purple first opened on Broadway on December 1, 2005 and ran until February 24, 2008. The eleven-time-Tony-nominated musical featured music and lyrics by Brenda Russell, Allee Willis, and Stephen Bray and a book by Marsha Norman. The musical spans most of the life of Celie, a young woman living in rural Georgia in the early 20th century. The initial production acknowledged the novel's epistolary nature with the set design (the curtain looked like a letter beginning "Dear God"), as well as including the device in the opening number:

“Dear God, I am only – I am fourteen years old...I am—I have always been a good girl...Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what’s happening to me,” the pregnant Celie prays.³⁷⁵

The plot begins with Celie and her younger sister Nettie playing together, then tracks their separation as Celie's stepfather (the father of her children) gives Celie in marriage to a man named Mister and Nettie continues to work towards being a teacher. It follows Celie's romantic relationship with her husband's mistress, jazz singer Shug Avery. (While most of this relationship takes place after Celie has left the age range of adolescence and emergent adulthood, it does define her as a queer character, which means that her adolescence and emergent adulthood were queer even if she is not actively shown courting or being courted by a woman at that time.) By the musical's end, Celie has left her abusive marriage, stopped seeing the frequently-unfaithful Shug, and started a successful business sewing pants; she is finally able to see her sister again after Shug and Mister conspire to help her and Celie’s children to return from Africa, where she has been working as a missionary. By engaging Celie and Shug’s queerness as a natural element of their lives that contributes to their efficacy as religious believers, the musical makes a quiet argument for the compatibility of queerness and faith without doing so in a way that overrides the narrative’s larger argument of self-acceptance and empowerment more broadly writ.

Critical responses to the musical were mixed, running the gamut from *Variety* critic David Roomey's affirmation that "Walker created an indelible world as evocative and affecting in its depiction of sorrow and injustice as it is of joy, self-discovery and the redemptive power of love" to John Lahr's dismissal of the musical as "strangely soulless" in spite of its appeal to the

³⁷⁵ Brenda Russell, Allee Willis, Stephen Bray, Marsha Norman, *The Color Purple: A Memory Book* (New York, NY: Da Capo Press, 2006), 117.

African American audiences whose stories remain comparatively rarely showcased on the Great White Way.³⁷⁶ Whether the adaptation was successful or not, most agreed that the built-in audience of fans of the book and movie would serve the musical's box office ambitions well (a prediction carried out by the production's respectable run).

2005 and the years leading directly up to it were not particularly significant for LGBTQ history; aside from additional states banning marriage equality, the queer social landscape was not appreciably different from that described around *bare: a pop opera's* 2004 premiere. *The Color Purple*, however, was not written in response to current events. Alice Walker's novel was released at a significant cultural moment for LGBTQ people, nine years after the American Psychological Association removed homosexuality from its list of disorders and three years after the first March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights (meaning it was written even closer in time to those events). The years just before the AIDS epidemic were marked by an uptick in queer visibility and acceptability – the sexual revolution and shifting family structures made social space in which queerness could thrive. (The cultural backlash against the LGBTQ community as a result of the AIDS epidemic is, in fact, partly responsible for *The Color Purple's* 2005 production occurring in a very different social landscape for queer people than the novel's initial release; there was already a thriving underground queer theatre scene in the 1980s, so the idea that a romantic relationship between two women on a Broadway stage would still be controversial two decades later would likely have been a surprise.)

The narrative action of the novel is set earlier still, stretching from 1911 (when Celie was 14) to 1945 when she was 50. Cultural conversations around homosexuality were taking place

³⁷⁶ David Rooney, "Walker's Message a 'Purple' People Pleaser," *Variety*, May 12, 2005, 42; John Lahr, "Artificial Respiration," *The New Yorker*, December 12, 2005, 85.

during the time period of the novel, but it is unlikely the academic circles in which they were largely happening during the years when Celie and Shug became romantically involved would have been accessible to people in rural communities. (It *is* interesting to note that Ma Rainey, a well-known African American blues singer who had intimate ties to women and to whom the singer Shug bears narrative resemblance, signed her first recording contract the year after Shug and Celie meet in the novel, placing Shug and Celie’s relationship within a historically plausible context.) While the musical does not engage in an explicit discussion about queerness and faith, however, its depiction of Celie as unashamed and unconcerned about her romantic relationship with Shug (and without reason for shame and concern aside from Shug’s unfaithfulness) in this musical’s time period is particularly meaningful for a work of art aimed at the African American community whose churches, scholars suggest, often still hew tightly to African American theologies formed near and before the time of the musical’s setting.³⁷⁷ Celie and Shug would not have identified with words like “bisexual” or “lesbian,” but they are clearly women who have an intimate relationship with at least one other woman. Celie’s love for Shug is not discussed as being a different kind of love or being riskier than her love for anyone else.

That is not to say that the queerness that seemed unremarkable in the world of the play went similarly unremarked in 2005. Linda Winer of “Newsday” notes that “this is surely the first mainstream musical to make a first-act curtain number from a lesbian kiss and a love ballad – something Steven Spielberg hardly dared to touch in his 1985 movie,” nodding towards a change

³⁷⁷ See, for example, Heard Harvey and Ricard; Ward; Yasmiyn A Irizarry and Ravi K Perry, “Challenging the Black Church Narrative: Race, Class, and Homosexual Attitudes,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 65, no. 7 (2018): 884–911, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2017.1364566>.

in the kinds of queer narratives allowed to appear in popular media over time.³⁷⁸ (Michael Feingold characterized the audience's response to the kiss as "nervous titters," confirming that the act was, while now possible, still surprising in 2005.)³⁷⁹ Critics differed, however, on the degree to which the staged moment and Celie and Shug's relationship honored the novel's intentions, with "Gay City News" critic David Kennerley praising the "creative team for embracing this extraordinary Sapphic bond at the risk of alienating a sizeable chunk of potential audience" even as Jeremy McCarter of "New York Magazine" complained that "the lesbian element in Celie's story gets swept aside[,] dispatched here with a couple of timid kisses and some platitudinous lyrics"³⁸⁰

McCarter refers to the musical's religiosity as the "unlikely thread" holding the plot together, blaming the religious elements and the musical's intention to "defend...the faith" for its tiptoeing around sexuality.³⁸¹ Though I do not extensively engage with the musical's relationship to its source material, it *does* seem worth noting that the allegedly less sexuality-shy novel is written as a series of letters to God; the religious nature of the narrative was not grafted onto the musical as part of the adaptation process but was an intrinsic part of Walker's vision for the piece.

³⁷⁸ Linda Winer, "Deep 'Purple' with Blues Highlights," *Newsday*, December 2, 2005, B4.

³⁷⁹ Michael Feingold, "Prosaically 'Purple': Competence, Not Inspiration, Drives a New Broadway Musical Version of The Color Purple," *The Village Voice*, December 7, 2005, 68.

³⁸⁰ David Kennerley, "Purple Passion," *Gay City News*, December 29, 2005, 18.

³⁸¹ Jeremy McCarter, "Metropolitan Oprah: The Color Purple, Polished Too Smooth, Has Nothing Left but Heartfelt Uplift," *New York Magazine*, December 12, 2005, 86.

When the 2015 revival opened, the musical's religiosity received attention once again, this time as part of a more generally positive review. *The Hollywood Reporter's* David Rooney praised the revival's "grace, restraint and soaring spirituality, peeling back the excess to expose the life-affirming material's molten emotional core," referring to the adaptation's paring down of both book and production elements.³⁸² (In contrast to the original production's large, moving sets and quick pace, the revival was performed on a unit set and used chairs for all set pieces.) In an *Ecumenica* article, Aaron Brown highlights the revival's focus on authentically capturing a historically specific black American experience in a way that was accessible to contemporary black audiences rather than being sanitized or stereotyped for a white aesthetic. "African-American worship functioned as a storytelling device that enhanced the story and avoided mere novelty," Brown explains, suggesting that the production's staging and design decisions created an experience that privileged the insider knowledge of African Americans in regard to norms of the black church, "translat[ing] the church's validation of black identity in the design of the production."³⁸³

The Color Purple honors the importance and validity of faith as a balm for wounds and a source of personal empowerment, engaging a womanist theology to encourage viewers to be open to the Divine...in whatever unusual places it might appear.

"The Good Lord Works in Mysterious Ways"

Religion is important in the world of *The Color Purple*; in some ways, the musical's narrative arc is that of Celie's journey away from and back to her faith. After a brief introductory

³⁸² David Rooney, "'The Color Purple': Theater Review," *The Hollywood Reporter*, December 10, 2015, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/jennifer-hudson-color-purple-theater-847846>.

³⁸³ Brown, 66-67.

scene of the young Celie and Nettie playing together, the musical opens on a Sunday morning church service, with most of the town packed into the building to praise the Lord...and engage in some gossip. “Opening/Mysterious Ways” establishes several conventions of the musical. First, “Opening” is a melody that will reoccur between the sisters repeatedly, indicative of their bond. It also clarifies the social expectations with which the girls have grown up: men are the rulers of their domains (“Papa don’t like no screamin’ round here / No lip from da woman when they chug dat beer”) and girls should seek to someday marry men (“Gonna be grown ladies of da marryin’ kind”).³⁸⁴

Second, the song establishes Celie as someone marked as an outsider in her own community. When she reenters in “Mysterious Ways,” she is fourteen and pregnant. The church community reveals that the father is her stepfather who killed her mother. Finally, “the good Lord works in mysterious ways” operates as something of a thesis to the musical.³⁸⁵ The song references Biblical heroes who were delivered from terrible situations or succeeded in the face of impossible odds thanks to God’s favor and intervention. Putting these stories in counterpoint to Celie giving birth and having Pa take the baby – to kill, she suspects, though he says he is giving the baby away – suggests that Celie’s terrible situation might be one such opportunity for deliverance. Though the journey is long, by the musical’s end the good Lord will, indeed, work in mysterious ways: in part, through Celie’s queerness.

Young teenagers Celie and Nettie reinforce both their bond and their faith (and the connection between the two) as they sing “Our Prayer:”

When I lay me down to sleep

³⁸⁴ Russell, et al., 113.

³⁸⁵ Russell, et al., 116.

I will say my prayer
 That God love me so deep
 He will promise our souls to keep
 Together
 I say a prayer.³⁸⁶

In the same scene – a scene in which Mister comes to try to marry Nettie and Mister gives him Celie instead – the church ladies affirm the girls’ need for God as redeemer, referencing a spiritual: “They need a chariot today / To swing low and carry them away.”³⁸⁷ By the end of the scene, Celie is leaving with the already-clearly-abusive Mister (not being kept with Nettie), Nettie is left at home with a “leech of a man” – their needs are greater than ever.³⁸⁸

Deliverance does not come immediately. The musical shows Celie using both her faith and the promise of her future with her sister as sources of comfort as she struggles with managing Mister’s household and several children, but when Mister attempts to sexually assault Nettie (who has, on a visit, revealed that she can no longer stay at home with Pa), Nettie fights back and Mister bans her from the property and bans Celie from ever having contact with her sister again.

Celie throws down the gauntlet to God in prayer, asking “Won’t you bring back my Nettie? / You the only one who can” then demanding:

I never ask for anything
 But I’m asking for this
 If I’m really a lily of the field
 You will answer my prayers
 Or you’re no God at all!³⁸⁹

³⁸⁶ Russell, et al., 119.

³⁸⁷ Russell, et al., 121.

³⁸⁸ Russell, et al., 121.

³⁸⁹ Russell, et al., 125.

Years pass without sight of or mail from Nettie, and Celie sings “so many winters grey and summers blue / what kind of God are you?” reflecting a crisis of faith.³⁹⁰

A rejuvenation of Celie’s faith comes from an unlikely direction. Her life continues to be difficult – her husband is abusive, her friend Sofia leaves Celie’s stepson, Harpo, after he tries to beat her at Celie’s advice, and Mister is openly excited about continuing an affair with Shug Avery, the blues singer coming to town. Shug carries her own religious complications – she is well-known for sleeping with the men of the town (“Shug Avery Comin’ to Town” features the town’s women complaining about needing to lock their men up while she is in town and the town men getting dressed up in anticipation of her visit) and her father, the town preacher, has disowned her as a result of having children out of wedlock.

Unlike most of the women of the town, however, Celie is not particularly upset at her husband’s impending affair. Rather, she seems curious about Shug:

Got about a million questions
Crawling around in my head
What she wear?
How her hair?
Is she skinny?
Is she stout?
Must be something’ to fuss about.³⁹¹

Celie’s interest could be played as idle curiosity, but its positioning in the middle of a song dividing the townspeople between those who hate Shug for titillating others and those who are titillated by her invites a reading placing Celie tentatively (and perhaps subconsciously) in the second camp.

³⁹⁰ Russell, et al., 125.

³⁹¹ Russell, et al., 135.

The melody anticipates Celie's first encounter with Shug, which solidifies her interest. Mister brings the singer to his house. She is extremely ill, and it is up to Celie to nurse her back to health. Celie bathes her and sings:

Got about a million tingles
 Sneakin' up on my spine
 I wash her body and it feel like I'm prayin'
 Try not to look but my eyes ain't obeyin'
 Guess I found out
 What all of the fuss is about.
 Not like Nettie, not like Sofia
 Not like nobody else up in here
 Shug Avery.³⁹²

The moment establishes Celie's sexual interest in Shug. Throughout the musical, Celie has displayed an interest in other women that (save for their family ties) could be *read* as romantic (she is, for example, fascinated by Sophia, her daughter in law); this moment illustrates that Celie is aware of the kind of affection she has felt for her sister and daughter in law and identifies this potential homosocial bond as something entirely different. It also offers an immediate link between queerness and faith in the form of a metaphor, with washing Shug feeling like a prayer. Praying was once an activity Celie engaged in joyfully before Nettie left; something about her connection with Shug recaptures a similar feeling. The statement could certainly read as sacrilegious, particularly given that Celie has not engaged in meaningful dialogue with God since calling the Divine "no God at all," but it also operates as a kind of foreshadowing of the mysterious way in which God will work later in the musical.

Shug stays with Celie and Mister for some time, recuperating and preparing to perform at Harpo's (Celie's stepson) juke joint. Shug and Celie become friends and through their conversations reveal that Shug is continuing to sleep with Albert – she "got what you call a

³⁹² Russell, et al., 139.

passion for him” – with Celie’s blessing. Celie does not enjoy sex with her husband and would certainly prefer someone else had it. It also becomes clear that Celie’s interest in Shug was not merely passing novelty...and is not unrequited. When Celie explains that Albert thinks she is ugly, Shug dismisses the notion: “You not ugly. You the grace of God if us ever see it,” she reassures before doubling down in song, telling Celie that

I seen this life from high and low
 And all that’s in-between
 I danced with dukes, crooned with counts
 Been courted like a queen
 But when I see what’s in your heart
 All the rest is blurred
 The grace you bring into the world’s
 Too beautiful for words.³⁹³

It is unmistakably a love song and once more brings elements of faith into the emergent queer coupling. The coupling is made explicit after Shug’s performance at the juke joint when she reassures Celie that she will return after her forthcoming trip away. “I’ll be back. Nobody ever love me like you,” Shug says before kissing Celie.³⁹⁴

The two sing together then, a duet solidifying their relationship through language that *could* be characterized as “platitudinous” or religious. Their kiss operates as a sort of baptism, bringing out something new in both women. “Is that me who’s floating away?...Never felt nothin’ like this,” Celie sings, with Shug asking “Is that me I don’t recognize?”³⁹⁵ The women position their relationship as a story inviting belief (“I want you to be / A story for me / That I can believe in forever”) characterized, they hope, by the qualities of trust, tenderness, love, hope,

³⁹³ Russell, et al., 141.

³⁹⁴ Russell, et al., 148.

³⁹⁵ Russell, et al., 149.

and joy, a rhetorical turn that resembles the goal of the stories of the Bible calling into being the fruits of the Spirit (“love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” – the end of the verse, “Against such things there is no law,” carries an additional meaning when engaged in the context of a queer relationship that is doing the work of bringing about the fruits of the Spirit in its participants).³⁹⁶

The women repeatedly use language that brings to mind Biblical allusions. “What about wings when I fall?” brings to mind the repeated Biblical metaphors of God’s wings as a source of love, protection, and defense.³⁹⁷ (This reference is particularly interesting given Shug’s eventual argument that God is without gender, as the repeated references to God-as-mother-bird are often used as evidence of scriptural support of God as a being with both masculine and feminine characteristics.)³⁹⁸ “Will you be my light in the storm?” brings to mind both the Bible’s repeated references to God as a light (Psalm 21:7 for example, “The LORD is my light and my salvation— whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life— of whom shall I be afraid?”) and repeated exhortations for believers to serve as the “light of the world,” offering hope to others.³⁹⁹

³⁹⁶ Russell, et al., 149; Galatians 5:22-23, NIV

³⁹⁷ See, for example, Deuteronomy 32:11, Jeremiah 49:22, Matthew 23:37, and Psalms 17, 36, 57, 61, 63, and 91. Russell, et al., 149.

³⁹⁸ For examples of imagery of the Divine Feminine in Christianity see James Gordon McConville, "Neither Male nor Female: Poetic Imagery and the Nature of God in the Old Testament," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 44, no. 1 (2019): 166–81, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309089218778585> and Virginia R Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female* (New York: Crossroad Pub. Co., 1983).

³⁹⁹ Matthew 5:14a, NIV

Shug and Celie bring each other that hope – “with you my whole spirit rise.”⁴⁰⁰ Shug suggests that Celie was “sent to” her, perhaps by God.⁴⁰¹ The women are acting as a light to each other, providing each other with support, serving as echoes of the Divine in each other’s lives. This interpretation is supported by the fact that Shug gives Celie Nettie’s letters that Mister has been hiding immediately after this song ends – it is through Shug that Nettie’s prayers for reconciliation with her sister are answered. (The letters allow Celie to engage in the resilience tactic of escapism, growing stronger as she connects with her sister across space and time and being mentally transported to her sister’s home in Africa.) Shug also supports Celie in living a Godly life in more practical ways – “the Bible says don’t kill” is her somewhat tongue-in-cheek response to Celie’s statement that she is going to kill her husband when he returns home.⁴⁰²

Shug is present on Easter Sunday when Celie experiences a spiritual low point after Shug returns from out of town with her new husband, her sister has stopped writing, and police have beaten Sofia. When Shug asks Celie why she is upset, questioning why she is not excited for Easter, Celie answers: “Easter mean nuthin’ to me. I prayed to God my whole life and what he done? Nuthin’...God forgot about me!”⁴⁰³

Shug argues against this thought. “God want us to be happy, Celie, Want us to love each other, help each other...”⁴⁰⁴ God, she explains, does not want Celie to have an unhappy life with

⁴⁰⁰ Russell, et al., 149.

⁴⁰¹ Russell, et al., 149.

⁴⁰² Russell, et al., 153.

⁴⁰³ Russell, et al., 161.

⁴⁰⁴ Russell, et al., 161.

a violent man – “God not some gloomy old man like the pictures you’ve seen of him. God not a man at all.”⁴⁰⁵ Celie has been mistreated by men her entire life; her perceived mistreatment by a masculine God carrying man’s image is not a surprise. Shug’s offer of a revised theology is worth quoting at length:

God is inside you and everyone else
That was or ever will be
We come into this world with God
But only them that look inside, find it

God is the flowers and everything else
That was or ever will be
And when you feel the truth so real
And when you love the way you feel,
You’ve found it.

...
Like the color purple
Where do it come from?
Open up your eyes
Look what God has done.⁴⁰⁶

Shug’s statement of faith suggests that God is not like a man with a human’s flaws and failings, but rather a force in which everyone is invited to partake. That partaking requires a connection with oneself and the world around one; God is in joy and other people and the majesty of nature.

Shug’s theology is not mainstream Christian theology – most Christians would not agree with the statement that God *is* the flowers (as opposed to “God made the flowers” or “God’s glory is revealed in the flowers”) – but it is also not *not* Christian theology; Shug continues to refer to God as a Being with agency, seemingly making a point about God’s inhumanity rather than advocating transcendentalism. The world of *The Color Purple* is a culturally as well as religiously Protestant one, so a wholesale suggestion of a different religious system would likely

⁴⁰⁵ Russell, et al., 161.

⁴⁰⁶ Russell, et al., 161.

require more clarification than proposing a new viewpoint about the essential character of the Christian God.

Shug's theology – sidestepping the androcentrism of much contemporary Christianity – has parallels to womanist theology, a theological branch devoted to exploring liberatory theological possibilities for black women. Delores Williams originally coined the term “womanist theology” in conversation with *The Color Purple* author Alice Walker's concept of womanism.⁴⁰⁷ Adam Clark explains that womanist theology “emphasizes a sensibility where black women love men and women, sexually or nonsexually, and distinguish themselves from white feminism by being 'committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female'” rather than engaging in reductionist identity politics.⁴⁰⁸ *The Color Purple* engages a theology in which many kinds of love of many genders is indicative of the Divine, so it makes sense that neither Celie or Shug are explicitly exclusively same-sex attracted.

Celie, seeming unimpressed with Shug's suggestion of thankfulness as a balm to her woes, asks “God gon take me to live with you?” Shug agrees. Celie tells Mister than she is leaving, picking up on Shug's suggestion that the Divine is accessed through self-actualization and appreciation of the world when she tells him, “It's time for me to leave you and enter into creation.”⁴⁰⁹ He attempts to keep her from leaving, mocking her, and she displays her resilience in both finding her community and fighting back when she warns him that “when [my Nettie and my children] come home, all us together gon whup your ass” before she curses him: “Until you

⁴⁰⁷ Adam Clark, “Hagar the Egyptian: A Womanist Dialogue,” *Western Journal of Black Studies* 36, no. 1 (2012): 48–56.

⁴⁰⁸ Clark, 51.

⁴⁰⁹ Russell, et al., 163.

do right by me, everything and everyone you touch will crumble, everything you even dream will fail.”⁴¹⁰ When he tells her that her curse will not work because “you black, you poor, you ugly, you a woman,” Celie responds in song:

I may be poor
I may be black
I may be ugly
But I’m here!⁴¹¹

It is the first time since her final song with her sister as a child that Celie belts, moving towards coming into her own with her full voice and body (though not fully yet, as indicated by the fact that this song is only a tiny snippet).

Celie's belief in her own worth, her new ability to "love the way [she] feel[s]," has a ripple effect as she develops a successful career, first making pants for Shug in Tennessee and then opening a business in her childhood home once her stepfather dies. The business takes off and does well and, for the first time, Celie is the recipient of positive attention in her community. Mister is helping people in the community and taking part in the lives of Harpo and Sophia's children. Harpo and Sophia are happily reunited, having finally gotten back together the day Celie left Mister. The whole community is operating in new ways as a result of the love Shug shared with Celie, spiraling out from the moment the women found the courage to ask the question "what about love?"⁴¹²

It is at this moment that the musical makes a theological shift. It is entirely possible for an audience member to view the way Shug and Celie use theological language towards each other

⁴¹⁰ Russell, et al., 164.

⁴¹¹ Russell, et al., 164.

⁴¹² Russell, et al., 149.

as a kind of sacrilege – is Celie replacing the God by Whom she never felt loved with the woman by whom she did? Did the realization that God is not a person simply lead to her building a new life on the foundation of a woman who certainly is? *The Color Purple* offers an answer: no.

Shug visits Celie and reveals that she has fallen in love (or at least lust) with her new jazz flute player and needs six months to pursue a relationship with him – “my last fling,” she explains.⁴¹³ Celie reprises “What About Love,” singing the lyrics back at Shug as Shug protests that “you know this boy gon hurt me twice as much as I’m hurtin’ you.”⁴¹⁴ Shug asks Celie for permission to have her fling and then return...and Celie says no. “I don’t need you to love me / I don’t need you to love.”⁴¹⁵ Her relationship with Shug served an important and life-affirming purpose for Celie, but it is not, in fact, infallible. Shug is not a God. Their relationship is not a religion. It *was*, however, a way for Celie to find the person she was created to be.

This time when things fall apart, Celie does not blame God and shut down. She knows her own worth, and she has developed an appreciation for the life she has whether Shug is in it or not:

I believe I have inside of me
 Everything I need to live a bountiful life
 With all the love alive in me
 I’ll stand as tall as the tallest tree
 And I’m thankful for every day that I’m given
 Both the easy and the hard ones I’m livin’
 But most of all
 I’m thankful for
 Knowing who I really am
 I’m beautiful
 Yes I’m beautiful

⁴¹³ Russell, et al., 173.

⁴¹⁴ Russell, et al., 173.

⁴¹⁵ Russell, et al., 173.

And I'm here.⁴¹⁶

It is a statement of faith and a personal affirmation and a vocal tour de force, Celie finally claiming her space in the world fully and completely, regardless of her relationship to the people around her.

Even without Shug, Celie continues to thrive in the womanist theological truth that “God want us to be happy...to love each other, help each other...”⁴¹⁷ Her business continues to grow and she develops closer relationships with the people of the community. The people who have been forces of pain in Celie’s life work together for her good as Shug and Mister conspire to get Nettie and Celie’s children back from Africa and to the picnic. Celie has grown as a person, too; instead of working with her sister and children to “whup [Mister’s] ass” as she once threatened, she and Mister are able to strike up a tentative friendship as he empathizes with her about the pain of Shug walking away. The girl who was terrified and alone has grown into a resilient woman who is the center of a loving, interdependent community, and Celie is in the middle of her community when she sings: “I came into this world with God / and when I finally looked inside I found it / Just as close as my breath is to me.”⁴¹⁸

The ensemble agrees with her: the world itself, life itself, is a miracle for those who will see it, and opening one’s eyes to see it is a choice...as is doing the labor of helping open the eyes of others:

It takes a grain of love
To make a mighty tree
Even the smallest voice

⁴¹⁶ Russell, et al., 173.

⁴¹⁷ Russell, et al., 161.

⁴¹⁸ Russell, et al., 176.

Can make a harmony.⁴¹⁹

The Color Purple invites its viewers to join in the song.

Spring Awakening (2006, 2015)

Spring Awakening, a rock musical adaptation of Frank Wedekind's play about children's sexuality and the dangers of preventing children from accessing sexual information, first opened on Broadway on December 10, 2006 and ran through January 18, 2009.⁴²⁰ Deaf West's limited-run revival ran from September 27, 2015 to January 24, 2016. The musical adaptation featured a score by Duncan Sheik and book and lyrics by Steven Sater. *Spring Awakening* tells the story of a group of schoolchildren in Germany in the late 19th century with book scenes close to Wedekind's original play interspersed with songs in a contemporary pop-rock style. The music of *Spring Awakening* operates somewhat unusually: some songs could be interpreted to be sung by characters in a way that other characters can hear (the usual mode of communication in musicals), but most capture solitary internal realities, even when performed as an ensemble. In the original Broadway production, this was highlighted by the performance convention of actors producing handheld microphones for each song. (This performance convention, which calls attention to the songs as performances, is written into the musical's libretto.) The result is Brechtian, repeatedly calling audience members' attention to the fact that they are watching a performance in the present moment. *Spring Awakening* parallels the present with the past; contemporary narratives of adolescent sexuality may be hyperfocused on queer identity, but what is (and has always been) true is that *all* young people face challenges as they develop sexual

⁴¹⁹ Russell, et al., 177.

⁴²⁰ The stage of childhood Wedekind captured is contemporarily understood as adolescence and is captured as such in the musical; adolescence as a discrete stage of development was not a widespread concept when Wedekind was writing.

identities, challenges exacerbated by the adults in their lives failing to offer accurate and appropriate information.

The musical opens with Wendla, a teenager who has recently gone through puberty, asking her mother where babies come from and receiving an inaccurate answer. The question of the ethics of providing or not providing accurate sexual education pervades the rest of the musical: Morris (a messy schoolboy) confesses to Melchior (his academically successful friend) that he has been unable to study due to dreams he does not understand. Melchior offers to write him an essay on human sexuality to explain them. Melchior and Wendla, who knew each other as children but attend sex-segregated schools, meet and begin a romance that culminates in their sexual union. In the second act, everything goes awry: Moritz, having been unfairly failed out of school, commits suicide. Melchior is expelled from school, his essay to Moritz blamed for Moritz's death. Wendla is revealed to be pregnant, though she has no idea what she could have done to cause that; when her mother learns of her liaison with Melchior and tells Melchior's parents, they send him to a reform school, as he knew better and had sex with Wendla anyway. Wendla's mother takes her to get a back-alley abortion and she dies. The musical ends with Melchior returning to his friends' graves and pledging to continue to live his life with their ghosts' encouragement before the ensemble sings a coda together. Along the way, other subplots emerge, including the romance of the musical's queer characters, Hanschen and Ernst. These characters complicate historical understandings of queerness, both positive and negative – they do not face persecution for their romantic coupling, but they are also not a force of progressivism in a world living in tension between the past and future.

Charles Isherwood praised *Spring Awakening* as a work that was “something unusual and aspiring, something vital and new,” and the sense of the musical as being too exciting to

seriously critique permeates many of the reviews (though most do ultimately nod to a lack of depth in certain moments or characters, with which moments and characters varying).⁴²¹ Unlike some shows in which the characters *happen* to be young people, the adolescence of the characters of *Spring Awakening* is an essential plot point, and critics point out the way the show highlights it. “Sater’s book and lyrics seem to capture from within the uniquely teenage feeling that every emotion is the most tempestuous, frightening, passionate, or exciting one ever experienced,” *Variety*’s David Rooney writes.⁴²²

The 2015 revival – a production by Deaf West Theatre that incorporated hearing, deaf, and hearing impaired actors and added the unspoken layer of reckoning with the oral training methods for deaf students imposed by the 1880 Second International Congress on Education of the Deaf – was similarly praised. However, some critics suggested that the convention of doubling deaf and hard of hearing actors who physically embodied the roles with musicians who sang their music and spoke their lines while they signed was distracting or limited the emotional impact of the musical.⁴²³

Though the 2006 production took place in roughly the same cultural context as *bare* and *The Color Purple*, the 2015 fall revival opened amid the celebration (and fallout) of the summer’s legalization of Marriage Equality throughout the United States. For critic Christopher Byrne, the cultural moment gave the production additional relevance: “While it is set in 19th

⁴²¹ Charles Isherwood, “A Rock’n Roll Heartbeat for German Schoolboys of the 19th Century,” *N.Y. Times*, June 6, 2006, E3.

⁴²² David Rooney, “Troubled-teen Tuner Rocks on Broadway,” *Variety*, December 18, 2006, 52.

⁴²³ See, for example, Christopher Byrne, “Spring Awakening,” *Gay City News*, Oct. 15, 2015, 36 and Elisabeth Vincentelli, “Some Spring in its Step,” *N.Y. Post*, Sep. 28, 2015, 34.

century Germany, the story of teenage torment and the conflict between human nature – both biological and emotional – and a reactionary society had contemporary resonance. That resonance is even more pronounced a decade later as the media is suffused with the idiotic maunderings of Mike Huckabee, Kim Davis, and all the other militant moralists lusting to impose their religious beliefs on the culture at large.”⁴²⁴

This cultural tension echoes the musical's narrative context. The 1848 German revolution saw a rise in labor movements championing socialism and distancing themselves from organized religion, leading to a late-nineteenth-century Germany in which Christianity and socialism existed in tension.⁴²⁵ “Christianity was described as the enemy of culture and freedom and the church, according to Bebel, worked in the service of those who exploited and oppressed the working classes,” historian Stefan Berger explains, referencing August Bebel’s 1874 book, *Christianity and Socialism*.⁴²⁶ In Germany, churches were associated with “the politically powerful monarchy and the economically powerful industrialists,” positioning them as oppositional to the working class (including, presumably, those with marginal identities) as well as socialist intellectuals.⁴²⁷

This cultural tension between faith and socialist ideals is evidenced in some of Wendla and Melchior’s conversations about the plight of day laborers in the context of church-sponsored

⁴²⁴ Christopher Byrne, “Spring Awakening,” *Gay City News*, Oct. 15, 2015, 36.

⁴²⁵ Stefan Berger, “Difficult (Re-)Alignments – Comparative Perspectives on Social Democracy and Religion from Late-Nineteenth Century to Interwar Germany and Britain,” ed. Todd H Weir, *Journal of Contemporary History* 53, no. 3 (2018): 574–96, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022009417737603>.

⁴²⁶ Berger, 577.

⁴²⁷ Berger, 578.

charity. As a whole, however, the musical ignores the complex political discourse within and around religion in Germany happening during the plot events.⁴²⁸ Father Kaulbach references Martin Luther in his sermon, suggesting that the community is a Lutheran rather than a Catholic one, but there is no discussion of this distinction or the wars of ideology being fought in German cities. This decision makes narrative sense – the children in the small pastoral community would have little reason to be aware of broader cultural events, even if German theology was an international point of interest at the time.⁴²⁹ The characters are nominally people of faith, but the musical does not delve into the personal faith lives of anyone but Melchior (an atheist); in dealing with the church as a cultural institution, the musical potentially avoids offending religious audience members with inaccurate or offensive portrayals of Protestantism, but it also does not meaningfully engage with the implications of its ideologies on characters' (or people's) daily lives.

Despite critic Jonathan Warman's cheerful assertion that "even heterosexual feelings are such forbidden fruit in this context that they feel queer," however, this exploration focuses on the musical's canonically same-gender-attracted characters, Hanschen and Ernst.⁴³⁰ Most characters explore their sexual and romantic feelings in rural spaces outside the town proper, but the

⁴²⁸ Theodore S. Hamerow and Charles Calvert Bayley "Germany - Religion," Encyclopedia Britannica, January 1, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Germany>.

⁴²⁹ Michael Ledger-Lomas, "God's Own Story? German Theology and Its Nineteenth-Century Readers," *Reviews in Religion & Theology* 21, no. 4 (2014): 444–53, <https://doi.org/10.1111/riit.12399>.

⁴³⁰ Jonathan Warman, "Passion & Indie Rock via 19th Cent. Germany," *The New York Blade*, December 29, 2006, 19. Moritz is also popularly read as a queer character – there are strong implications that he is harboring unrequited romantic feelings for Melchior – but since those implications are never explicitly realized and exist largely in the staging and delivery of the musical's content they do not meet my threshold for considering a character to be canonically queer.

(invariably negative) implications of those explorations resonate in their academic and family lives; in contrast, Hanschen and Ernst never see backlash in town (or anywhere else) as a result of their relationship. This subverts the expectation that queerness (particularly historical queerness) is necessarily predictive of a difficult or unhappy life.

“Touch Me Just Like That”

Hanschen and Ernst are Melchior and Moritz’s classmates. They have the same challenges of sexual awakening, overwhelming amounts of homework, and frustrations with authority that all the other boys share, but there is no sense of additional shame or difficulty as a result of the fact that their interests are not exclusively directed towards women. In “The Bitch of Living,” when the boys sing about the challenges of adding sexual and romantic longing in addition to all the other difficulties of life, they sing about their own struggles:

Ernst: See, there’s showering in gym class...
 Hanschen: Bobby Maler, he’s the best—
 Looks so nasty in those khakis...
 Ernst: God, my whole life’s like some test.⁴³¹

Ernst reflects some degree of consternation with his interest, but no more than any of the other boys who have crushes they worry might be inappropriate; Hanschen has no shame whatsoever. Neither the stage directions nor staging decisions in either Broadway production suggest he makes any particular attempt to prevent the other boys leaving school from overhearing (or observing) when he offers to walk Ernst home, suggesting they might “do a little Achilles and Patroclus” while doing their homework together.⁴³² (The statement is a double entendre – the students are studying Homer in school and that is literally the topic of their homework, but

⁴³¹ Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik, *Spring Awakening* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2007), 24-25.

⁴³² Sater and Sheik, 26.

Achilles and Patroclus also have a very close bond that works outside of Homer’s frequently depicted as being a sexual or romantic one.) Ernst readily agrees.

The next time either of the boys appears in a featured moment, Hanschen is in his bathroom at home, masturbating to a miniature of Caravaggio’s “Io” (a painting showing the God Jupiter in the form of a cloud of smoke in a passionate embrace with a woman, Io, her naked back facing the viewer). He verbalizes his fantasy in the middle of “My Junk,” a song about crushes, speaking as if he is at once Othello addressing Desdemona and Jupiter addressing a demure Io, conflating the sex and violence of the two stories: “Darling why—why—do you press your knees together? Even now, on the brink of eternity? Don’t you see it’s your terrible chastity that’s driving me to…” he says before he is interrupted by his father telling him to leave the bathroom.⁴³³ Hanschen, then, explicitly displays sexual interest in both men and women, though this fact is unremarked in the musical.

He also displays a proclivity towards sexual violence that is potentially affronting to a contemporary viewer, but it is not a trait given solely to queer characters; sex and violence are linked throughout the musical along with explorations of consent. The question of consent is always a complicated one in *Spring Awakening* – girls sing about abuse, Wendla and Melchior’s sexual encounter can easily be read as coercive – but I suggest it is least complicated for the musical’s queer characters. Hanschen is not written as a particularly nice person, but he *is* a person in whom Ernst is clearly sexually invested.

Ernst has his own featured moment in the following song, the more sexually focused and lyrically fluid “Touch Me,” in which the ensemble explores sexual fantasies rather than the romance of crushes. He sings:

⁴³³ Sater and Sheik, 30.

Touch me—just like that.
 And that—O, yeah—now, that’s heaven.
 Now, that I like.
 God, that’s so nice.
 Now lower down, where the figs lie...⁴³⁴

Hanschen’s fantasies involve performing sexual acts on someone else while Ernst’s involve someone else performing sexual acts on him. Although the pair seems to align in a coupling coded as masculine and feminine in a way some find particularly concerning given the ardor of Hanschen’s eventual seduction (which *Variety* critic Peter DeBruge described as an "outright violation" in the original staging and much less so in the revival) – Hanschen is the pursuer romantically and desires to be so sexually and has a lower vocal range, Ernst is the pursued romantically and desires to be so sexually and has a higher vocal range – part of the work of these two separate moments can be establishing the complementary nature of the boys' desires and Ernst's assertive, consensual participation in a hypothetical coupling.⁴³⁵

Hanschen and Ernst reprise Wendla and Melchior’s song “The Word of Your Body,” but with some distinct differences. While Wendla and Melchior begin at several levels of remove from the emotional and sexual intimacy of the relationship – Melchior begins by “baiting some girl – with hypotheses!” requiring a journey from intellectual exchange to emotional intimacy to physical intimacy to unfold – Hanschen immediately invites Ernst to “cream away the bliss / Travel the word within my lips” before reprising the promise of both being wounded and wounding and kissing him.⁴³⁶ This could be attributed to the hypersexualization of media portrayals of queer people, particularly queer men, but in spite of fears of Hanschen violating

⁴³⁴ Sater and Sheik, 31.

⁴³⁵ Peter DeBruge, “Spring Awakening,” *Variety*, Oct. 6, 2015, 150.

⁴³⁶ Sater and Sheik, 77.

Ernst, there is a degree of mutual informed consent present in this song and relationship that does not exist for Wendla and Melchior (as illustrated by Ernst and Hanschen's scene immediately preceding the scene in which Wendla discovers she is pregnant). When Ernst expresses his surprise at the turn of events ("On my way here this afternoon, I thought perhaps we'd only...talk"), Hanschen checks in ("So, are you sorry we—?") and receives reassurance about Ernst's interest ("Oh no—I love you, Hanschen. As I've never loved anyone").⁴³⁷ While Hanschen's response makes him seem calculating or disinterested ("And so you should"), he does not escalate their contact until Ernst affirms his understanding of the relationship in song, picking back up the reprise with "O, I'm gonna be wounded / O, I'm gonna be your wound" before Hanschen joins him in song.⁴³⁸

These are not two people having separate thoughts or fears, these are people who are making an agreement, on the same page. (This is supported by the staging of both Broadway productions, but also by the stage direction indicating that they share a spotlight – they are together in this alternative performed reality.) The lyrics seem less like a warning or dire prediction than a promise, perhaps influenced to some degree by the masochism already demonstrated to be a part of Hanschen's desires. Aside from acting as the ensemble in "Song of Purple Summer," the moment of Hanschen and Ernst singing to each other is the last time either character appears. Their ending, such as it is, is a happy one, setting them apart from the grief of the heterosexual couple that ripples through the community.⁴³⁹

⁴³⁷ Sater and Sheik, 78.

⁴³⁸ Sater and Sheik, 78.

⁴³⁹ This point was emphasized in Daniel Ricken, "Three Ways a Man Can Go: Christian Masculinities in Spring Awakening," in *Changing Perspectives: Exploring the Intersections of Identity in Queer Musical Theatre Spectatorship and Performance* (Association for Theatre in Higher Education, Orlando, FL, 2019).

“Where the Sins Lie”

Sexuality is fraught for everyone in *Spring Awakening* – in “Touch Me,” the full company euphemistically describes their genitalia as “where the sins lie,” immediately followed by Wendla and Melchior’s (the central couple) first romantic encounter, in which they sing “O, I’m gonna be wounded / O, I’m gonna be your wound.”⁴⁴⁰ The expectation, at least subconsciously, is that love and especially sex are going to hurt, both physically and emotionally. For most of the adolescents in the show, that proves to be true: Wendla dies, Melchior is heartbroken, and both Ilse and Martha are sexually abused by men in their lives.

Cultural expectations and especially expectations for depictions of queerness in media anticipate that the musical’s queer couple will also face hardship, particularly living in their religious community. The Church as a social force seems omnipresent in *Spring Awakening* – Melchior’s atheism is frequently remarked on and most of the characters’ lives are structured around church social events and events on the liturgical calendar – but there is very little actual engagement with religion in the musical; aside from one sermon about honoring one’s parents offered in counterpoint to Wendla and Melchior’s intimate coupling, religion serves more as a lurking cloud than a system of beliefs with any particular influence on characters’ lives. It is unusually present, however, in Hanschen and Ernst’s scene alone together, not as negative foreshadowing but as part of a nice evening.

The musical moves quickly from the rock extravaganza of Melchior’s expulsion to Hanschen and Ernst “loll[ing] in the grass” in “a vineyard at sunset” – a comfortable, charming spot outside the social structures of the town.⁴⁴¹ Ernst reveals an interest in being a pastor

⁴⁴⁰ Sater and Sheik, 39 – 40.

⁴⁴¹ Sater and Sheik, 76.

someday, sharing with Hanschen the fantasy of his idyllic life being beloved by the town's children and his wife. Hanschen laughs at him, explaining that "the pious, serene faces you see on the clergy, it's all an act—to hide their envy."⁴⁴²

Envy, apparently, of being able to do things like flirting with a boy in the grass, which it seems the clergy are not allowed to do. That statement is the closest the musical comes to suggesting there is any censure of queerness in the world in which it takes place – the boys are hiding their dalliance, yes, but so are all the straight teenagers. Hanschen reveals that he is intentional about his choices, not making waves like Melchior or being completely overwhelmed like Moritz but instead choosing to "bide his time, and let the System work for him."⁴⁴³ Understanding that system allows him to feel sure of both his safety and success in his seduction.

Both boys are able to be resilient in an oppressive world because they are able to find escape together, fostering a small community of two in anticipation of growing stronger and stepping into their social roles. They are also, however, in arguably less need of resilience than the other characters in the musical. In a world before homosexuality was a popularly understood, named identity rather than a set of behaviors that could be discreetly indulged, both boys had every expectation that the system *would* work for them if they played their cards right – both were doing well in school and staying out of trouble, so there was no reason to expect that they would not grow up to have families and careers, whether or not they continued seeking sexual or romantic relationships with men in adulthood. *Spring Awakening* is unsentimental in its historical portrayals, and while it engages its queer characters for levity it is no less so for them;

⁴⁴² Sater and Sheik, 77.

⁴⁴³ Sater and Sheik, 77.

they are not revolutionaries taking a stand. They are normal schoolchildren following social expectations.

Spring Awakening ends with a song of hope, calling attention to the musical as a cautionary tale and wishing that

The sadness, the doubt, all the loss, the grief,
Will belong to some play from the past;
As the child leads the way to a dream, a belief,
A time of hope through the land...⁴⁴⁴

What that time of hope looks like is painted vaguely in idyllic pastoral imagery including flowers and corn and mares who “neigh with / stallions that they mate, foals they’ve borne...” which suggests a lack of shame around sexuality and reproduction that is not present in the world of the musical as such, the ability to communicate with both partners and children.⁴⁴⁵

There is not a conflict between queerness and faith in *Spring Awakening*, only between sexuality and faith in general and between the moral uprightness required of the clergy and the joys of dalliances in the grass; Hanschen and Ernst live in a world where their faith is assumed. It seems unlikely either that their coupling would be used as a tool to combat homophobia or as the incendiary moment onto which a displeased religious audience member might latch (there are, after all, much more life-or-death situations unfolding as a result of sex outside of wedlock that seem more important than who is kissing whom), but the pair offers a spot of sweetness and fairly uncomplicated consent in a harrowing second act; it is unusual that it is a queer character,

⁴⁴⁴ Sater and Sheik, 93.

⁴⁴⁵ Sater and Sheik, 93.

much less two, who is not only not killed or cast out but is allowed to end their story in a joyful moment.

There is a great deal of blame for the musical's tragedies to go around at the end of *Spring Awakening* in terms of social institutions, characters' individual choices, and the way the two interact. Part of Hanschen's (and, by extension, Ernst's) success is undoubtedly due to his awareness of how he fits into the broader social picture and his conscious decision to act in ways that did not endanger his position or hamper his ability to do as he liked within it. The legitimacy of choosing to lay low and make do in stifling social contexts is frequently criticized, especially in popular fiction aimed at young adults, but it is a plan that works if one can bear it (and one with significant historical grounding).

More importantly, though (and more saliently, judging from the musical's ending), perhaps the reason Ernst and Hanschen –who sing and move like contemporary young people while dressing and speaking like boys of a different era – are allowed a momentary happy ending is their ability to communicate openly with each other about their desires and ensuring the informed consent of their partner. Discovering who one is and what one wants is a confusing and scary part of growing up; it is less confusing and scary when undertaken with people one trusts. While *Spring Awakening* does not offer a pointed argument about queerness and faith, it *does* advocate for both positive relationships between young people and open conversations about sexuality from the adults in their lives. Those are lessons applicable to all audience members.

The Book of Mormon (2011)

The Book of Mormon opened in the Eugene O'Neill Theatre on March 24, 2011 and remains open at the time of writing. "South Park" creative team Trey Parker and Matt Stone conceived the five-time Tony-winning musical with Robert Lopez. The original musical follows

two missionaries from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as they set off on their mission (a two-year commitment to serving the Church and sharing their faith with others, sometimes along with providing humanitarian aid).⁴⁴⁶ Male Latter-day Saints may choose to serve a mission for two consecutive years between the ages of 18 and 25 (the age range of emergent adulthood) and are referred to as Elders.⁴⁴⁷ Female missionaries – “Sisters” – also exist, but are not acknowledged within the world of the musical. Instead, the world of *The Book of Mormon* is a world populated almost entirely by men: mostly straight, exclusively white missionaries and Ugandans painted by turns in racist stereotypes of brutish hypermasculinity and passive helplessness in need of a white savior.

The musical begins in the missionary training center where golden boy Elder Price and quirky failure Elder Cunningham are paired up and told they will be completing their mission in Uganda. (Elder Price hoped he would be sent to Orlando, but in spite of being the “smartest, best, most deserving Elder the center has ever seen,” as one of the other Elders describes him, he does not get his wish.)⁴⁴⁸ The pair travel to Uganda and discover that life there is complicated: the local group of missionaries has not managed to save anyone and the Ugandans near the base are being ravaged by disease, struggling with the morality of female genital mutilation, and living in fear of violence at the hands of local warmonger General Butt-Fucking Naked. Through

⁴⁴⁶ I follow the request of the head of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to use the church’s name in full when referring to the religious organization; Latter-day Saints denotes members of the church.

⁴⁴⁷ The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, “Missionary Program,” www.mormonnewsroom.org.au, April 3, 2013, <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org.au/topic/missionary-program>.

⁴⁴⁸ Trey Parker, Robert Lopez, and Matt Stone, *The Book of Mormon Script Book: The Complete Book and Lyrics of the Broadway Musical*, First Edition (New York: Newmarket Press, 2011), 5.

a series of misadventures, Elder Price learns humility and Elder Cunningham unintentionally founds his own branch of the faith by making up stories allegedly belonging to the *Book of Mormon* that are relevant to the Ugandans' contemporary problems. The mission coordinators of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are furious, but Elders Price and Cunningham and the Ugandan villagers are happy even without their approval – they have found something to believe in.

Reviews for the musical were generally positive, though they were divided between those who reveled in the satire of the piece – “If there is a message in the gloriously demented, strangely heartfelt ‘Book of Mormon,’ it’s that it doesn’t really matter what you believe in. If your faith gives you solace or hope and doesn’t get too many people killed, have at it,” the *Gay City News* critic David Kennerley wrote – and those who seem to view the musical’s foul-mouthed irreverence as a worthy price of admission to a good conventional book musical, like the *NY Times*’ Ben Brantley: “this [musical] is...blasphemous, scurrilous and more foul-mouthed than David Mamet on a blue streak. But trust me when I tell you that its heart is as pure as that of a Rodgers and Hammerstein show.”⁴⁴⁹ Some critics, however, could not get past the musical’s language – Cindy Adams of the *New York Post* suggested that the musical “should wash its mouth out with soap.”⁴⁵⁰ Others suggest that the musical’s treatment of the faith of the Latter-day Saints is unfair. John Lahr of *The New Yorker* writes that the musical's "sendup of religious fundamentalism is painted in broad acrylic strokes: shocking enough to elicit laughs but not deep

⁴⁴⁹ David Kennerley, “Latter Daze: Giving Broadway and Everybody Else a Pounding – and it Feels Good,” *Gay City News*, March 30, 2011, 24; Ben Brantley, “Missionaries Who Have Confidence in Sunshine,” *N.Y. Times*, March 25, 2011, sec. Weekend, 1.

⁴⁵⁰ Cindy Adams, “Fun Hath Gone Filthy,” *New York Post*, March 28, 2011, 14.

enough to generate understanding...The laughter is hip; the formula is Hollywood."⁴⁵¹ Behind the musical's traditional structure, however, is a surprisingly un-"hip" attitude towards queer identities; buried within the musical's winking send-up of The Church of Jesus-Christ of Latter-Day Saints' views of homosexuality is the implication that, while religious people who condemn queer people are distasteful, LGBTQ people are also undesirable as anything more than a joke. In spite of criticism of the musical's depth, scholars have found a great deal to discuss about *The Book of Mormon*. In addition to various articles, there is an entire book dedicated to the musical, *Singing and Dancing to The Book of Mormon: Critical Essays on the Broadway Musical*. In it, Marc Edward Shaw identifies part of *The Book of Mormon*'s labor as responding to faith-based initiatives against marriage equality, with particular attention to Latter-day Saint Mitt Romney, the Republican presidential nominee at the time the musical opened.⁴⁵² Gibson Alessandro Cima additionally problematizes *The Book of Mormon*'s white savior narrative and use of Uganda as a more or less fictional setting. Cima's critique of the musical's engagement with the history of homosexuality in Uganda is particularly relevant to this project. Cima suggests that the musical's satirical nature dangerously sidesteps engagement with the harm actual missionaries have done in Uganda, particularly those affiliated with organizations like "Pastor Scott Lively's Kansas City-based International House of Prayer Church and the LDS-affiliated Family Watch International" whose anti-gay preaching Cima and others credit for encouraging "the country's much-maligned Anti-Homosexuality Act and creating a climate of fear that led to the murder of

⁴⁵¹ John Lahr, "God Squad: Putting it to the Mormons," *The New Yorker*, April 4, 2011, 76.

⁴⁵² Marc Edward Shaw, "Negative Capabilities in *The Book of Mormon* Musical," in *Singing and Dancing to The Book of Mormon*, ed. Marc Edward Shaw and Holly Welker (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2016), 93-109.

Ugandan gay rights activist David Kato."⁴⁵³ The musical does not depict any queer Ugandans. While the musical's structural traditionalism and problematic racial representation has been examined in scholarship, its depiction of queerness has not been explored to the same extent.

“Turn it Off”

The musical barely depicts queer people at all, save for one missionary. Elder McKinley is the district leader of Elder Price and Elder Cunningham's mission area, meaning it is his job to supervise the other missionaries and serve as a point of contact between them and the higher-ups in the mission organization wing of the Church. He seems a natural fit for the leadership role – as soon as Price and Cunningham arrive, he sets about getting them settled in with introductions, then comforts Price's confusion with some advice.

McKinley's song, "Turn it Off," is intended to instruct the new Elders in the Latter-day Saint art of emotional repression. He empathizes with Elder Price's confusion and frustration at the unfamiliar location and the mission area's lack of progress (there have not yet been any baptisms) and suggests

It's super easy not to feel that way.
When you start to get confused
Because of thoughts in your head—
Don't feel those feelings—
Hold them in in-stead!
Turn 'em off!⁴⁵⁴

The other Elders chime in, agreeing with the message and offering object lessons. Elder Church sings about repressing memories of his father abusing his mother and Elder Thomas sings about

⁴⁵³ Gibson Alessandro Cima, "The Book of Mormon's African Fantasies," in *Singing and Dancing to The Book of Mormon*, ed. Marc Edward Shaw and Holly Welker (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2016), 129-142.

⁴⁵⁴ Parker, Lopez, and Stone, 25.

pushing away the guilt, grief, and fear of missing his sister's death while he was in line for an iPhone. Elder McKinley tells his story in the song's bridge, describing a close friendship he shared with another boy that led to his having romantic feelings for him. He begins describing his fantasies – “We'd swim naked in the sea and then he'd try and—” then cuts himself off, turning it off and proclaiming:

My hetero side just won
I'm all better now
Boys should be with girls,
That's Heavenly Father's plan,
So if you ever feel you'd rather be with a man—
Turn it off.⁴⁵⁵

When Elder Price disagrees with Elder McKinley's theology, suggesting that it is gay acts rather than gay desires that are sinful, Elder McKinley dismisses the solution – “Being gay is bad but lying is worse / so just realize you have a curable curse / and turn it off.”⁴⁵⁶

Any failure of the “turn it off” technique, McKinley explains, is really a personal failure meaning one did not invest sufficient effort in shutting down the undesirable thoughts or feelings. His suggestion to imagine one's thoughts as boxes and “find the box that's gay and crush it!!!” – shouted at the end rather than sung – paints him as the missionary who doth protest too much, but the song does not delve further into McKinley's experiences. Instead, Elder Price clarifies that he is straight and the Elders all cheer and continue with a celebratory refrain of the song.⁴⁵⁷

⁴⁵⁵ Parker, Lopez, and Stone, 27.

⁴⁵⁶ Parker, Lopez, and Stone, 20.

⁴⁵⁷ Parker, Lopez, and Stone, 30.

In some ways, “Turn it Off” effectively captures McKinley’s journey as a queer Latter-day Saint. Holly Welker and Marc Edward Shaw explain that the act of giving testimony is important to the faith tradition of Latter-day Saints, and that is the behavior in which the various Elders, led by McKinley, are engaging. Music, they note, is also important to the faith, so it is fitting that this song about the enactment of one’s faith is a particularly stereotypically musical theatre song (there are tap breaks).⁴⁵⁸ Shaw characterizes the song as asking “in a funny-but-heartbreaking way: how healthy is it for individuals or whole communities within a religion to ‘Turn It Off’?,” but I believe that reading is giving credit for empathy where it is not due. The musical never follows up on Elder McKinley’s personal experiences or explores the ways in which McKinley and the other Elders have been conditioned to learn to express their emotions by others before them.⁴⁵⁹ Instead, McKinley is the generator of the (clearly intended to be read as flawed) knowledge that feelings should be kept away and queerness is wrong. When Price – who has, at this point in the musical, been positioned as the Elder who knows and follows all the rules – offers hope of a less stringent way to live faithfully, McKinley rejects that hope. He is not created as a victim of a repressive culture, but a perpetrator of it. (In the real world, of course, those categories are not mutually exclusive, but rather interconnected in complicated ways. McKinley’s single song does not allow time or space for complication.)

McKinley might confirm the opinions of some religious audience members who agree that the appropriate way to deal with queerness is to avoid engaging with those feelings, but he

⁴⁵⁸ Marc Edward Shaw and Holly Welker, “Introduction: ‘This Book will Change your Life’: How Understanding *The Book of Mormon* Makes the Peculiar Possible,” in *Singing and Dancing to The Book of Mormon*, ed. Marc Edward Shaw and Holly Welker (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2016), xviii.

⁴⁵⁹ Shaw, “Negative Capabilities,” 95.

does not challenge them or invite them to add nuance to their opinion. McKinley's strategy is working for him. The musical suggests that his efforts to "turn it off" are not entirely *personally* effective – he still has a "spooky hell dream" every night reminding him of the risks of slipping off the straight and narrow – but they *are* enough to equip him to be chosen for a leadership position in his faith community.⁴⁶⁰ His job is to enforce the rules of the mission and he does so effectively, even when that enforcement is hard (like discouraging Elder Cunningham from following Elder Price when Price, upset, runs out of their living space after curfew). The character also confirms the understanding of queer people as somewhat suspect whether they are attempting to avoid their queerness or not; he is ultimately scolded for allowing Cunningham to teach the Ugandans his own made-up theology (though McKinley had no way of knowing he was doing so), and when Price and McKinley propose that the Elders ignore the mission president's decision to shut down the mission area and instead break with the formal Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to remain, McKinley readily agrees.

McKinley's character is in the script as a fairly one-note joke, and that presents potential problems for queer audience members and queer audience members of faith who do not find religiously enforced oppression or self-loathing particularly funny. McKinley's presence in *The Book of Mormon* also allows the musical to comment on queerness beyond his physical presence. David Cote of *The Observer* describes Elder Price as "the clean-cut ideal of a Mormon doorbell-pusher: white-bread, well-groomed and safely asexual," but it is McKinley's visible queerness that allows him to read as such.⁴⁶¹ Elders Price and Cunningham have a close relationship that could read as romantic: they have a rocky beginning, team up through trials, and share music in

⁴⁶⁰ Parker, Lopez, and Stone, 43.

⁴⁶¹ David Cote, "Welcome to Salt Lake Satire," *The Observer*, March 27, 2011, sec. Review, 35.

the form of lullabies to sing each other to sleep. By making queerness visible in the musical in Elder McKinley, *The Book of Mormon* reassures the audience that leads Price and Cunningham are not queer – if they were, the musical would show that, but the queerness of this musical is kept safely on the sidelines in one funny, stereotypical package. (Cunningham's near-obsessive desire to be best friends with Price could risk reading as erotic longing anyway, but he has a romance narrative with a woman he baptizes to make it very clear that he is straight.)

Anything potentially associated with queerness in the show is both coded as shameful and played for laughs. When Elder Price storms the camp of General Butt-Fucking Naked (the local warlord), the next scene reveals an X-ray of his *Book of Mormon*, which the general has lodged in his rectum. It is the same humor as that behind jokes about dropping the soap in prison – gay men engage in anal sexual activity, being gay is shameful, so anal penetration renders one as less of a man. That means that the idea of someone whose power resides in their masculinity being anally penetrated against their will is funny because it links them to queerness. Likewise, when the general returns to attack the village (who have stood up to him in anticipation of being delivered to Salt Lake City, only to find out the paradise they were promised is in another world and does not actually protect them on this mortal plane), Elders Price and Cunningham successfully warn him away with threats of divine retribution culminating in an attack by a Kraken which will “fire Joseph Smith torpedoes FROM its mouth of Christ and turn YOU into a LESBIAN!”⁴⁶² Nobody, after all, would want to be a lesbian – queer ladies are certainly worse than queer men (because they are women), it is a funny word, and it may not even exist given its position in a long list of other presumably fictional creations.

⁴⁶² Parker, Lopez, and Stone, 92.

Queer audience members are not likely to be surprised by the pressure McKinley feels to repress part of his identity; they may well be surprised and dismayed to find that the musical critically touted as irreverent progressive comedy seems to agree that that identity is, in fact, deserving of ridicule and isolation. There are plenty of other elements in *The Book of Mormon* that might serve to offend homophobic religious audience members but none that require them to reevaluate any judgments they have of queer people as destined for lives of abjection.

Conclusion

The three musicals in this chapter take place in times and/or places far removed from the contexts in which they were produced, but whether through shared religious practices and aesthetics, anachronistic music, or reliance on well-known tropes, all three create opportunities for connecting with audiences in their production contexts and in subsequent productions. By examining these musicals in the historical moments in which they found success I have attempted to consider the meaning audience members might distill from their evening of entertainment as it pertains to QPoF, honoring the ability of stories taking place in a different time and place to speak metaphorically to the present in a way more pointed pieces sometimes cannot.

The temporally remote *The Color Purple* and *Spring Awakening* share messages of the importance of interpersonal connection. While *Spring Awakening* ultimately does not engage meaningfully with the religious ideologies governing the lives of its queer characters or those ideologies' implications for their queerness, it does offer an opportunity to consider both the ethics of communication and consent in sexual and romantic relationships and the idea that queer people can be offered as examples of ethical sexual and romantic partners even in a world that seems as if it should reject them. The faith of Celie and the rest of the community is central to

The Color Purple, which suggests that God is beyond human faults and failures and encourages openness to any relationships that help people to become their best and most faithful selves.

In contrast, *The Book of Mormon* does not offer meaningful encouragement for queer audience members, instead reiterating their lack of belonging both in the faith of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and in the world at large, affirming that even people who are not committed to the doctrine of a specific faith system can and will still find queerness to be both funny and undesirable.

These musicals' status as the only adaptive works in the dissertation make it impossible to definitively argue whether it is their general lack of naming of queerness, the additional structural support (both in terms of crafting a coherent, appealing plot and soliciting financial and artistic backers for development processes) that can come with a piece adapting a known work, or the specific source materials adapted that made these musicals more commercially successful than the other works in the dissertation. While these musicals do not engage queerness and faith with the same complexity and intentionality as other works, they have done so with a much wider reach, meaning that their handling of the material is worthy of study.

Chapter 4: “Fall Down, Screw Up, Get Up”:

Framing with Failure

Chaos. Negativity. No future. Is the description referring to the life of a young man who has recently returned from being kept captive in a basement for a year, a kingdom destroyed by the gods in fulfillment of a prophecy, or a popular turn in queer theory beginning in the middle of the aughts? All three, in fact. Though *Kid Victory* and *Head Over Heels* would struggle to be more stylistically different, they share the common ground of sounding as if they are not conventional musicals at all in matters of both content and form. In this chapter, I - taking a page from Broadway musical *Waitress* - “focus on the negative.”⁴⁶³

Lee Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* marked a turn towards negativity in queer theory. The heterosexual world, Edelman argues, is configured around the preservation of life (and, by extension, culture) through children. Culture positions children and queerness as fundamentally incompatible, both because queerness is sexualized and children are not sexual and because children are associated with life and queerness with death (due to a lack of reproductive ability). Edelman’s project calls for a rejection of the symbolic child and the reproductive futurism that child espoused and an embrace of the death drive: queerness as the permanent, antirelational abject against which the norm is configured.⁴⁶⁴

Edelman’s book began a trend in queer theory with which many other theorists engaged, including Jack Halberstam. Halberstam’s 2011 book *The Queer Art of Failure* shares Edelman’s assessment that queer success is impossible within the value system(s) of contemporary society.

⁴⁶³ Sara Bareilles, “The Negative.” Spotify track, with Keala Settle, Kimiko Glenn, and Jessie Mueller, on *Waitress (Original Cast Recording)*, 2016, streaming audio. 2:27.

⁴⁶⁴ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Series Q (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

In this chapter, I engage both Halberstam's art of failure and the theology of failure before considering the role of failure (also informed by Edelman's strain of negativity) more specifically in the context of both musicals.

The musicals in this dissertation offer a reminder that, while queerness and youth may be *symbolically* positioned as antithetical, they are not actually incompatible – queer people (as all people) begin life as children, and queer young people have a future towards which they are growing. *Head Over Heels* and *Kid Victory* sidestep the challenge of a culture that positions queer young peoples' lives as impossibilities with plots focused on the present, honoring queer characters as dimensional humans with challenges and triumphs apart from their genders and sexualities. These musicals are not as obviously activist in nature as some other musicals in this dissertation, but they are also not hiding or ignoring characters' queerness; they are, instead, making the political decision to treat queerness as a (sometimes challenging, sometimes energizing) fact of life, displayed without commentary or apology.

Theorizing Failure and Negativity

Moments of failure are sometimes treated as occasions to “circle the wagons,” limiting vulnerability in order to decrease the possibility of future injury. Alternatively, failure can become a catalyst for lashing out, attempting to destroy sites of potential future failure. Brushes between queer communities and communities of faith have resulted in social violence in the form of focused efforts led by faith communities to limit the rights of LGBTQ people and in exclusionary efforts from both communities to protect themselves from a potentially hostile Other. The perceived incompatibility between queerness and faith leaves QPoF in a challenging no-man's-land, failing at the optimal performance of identity expected by both communities to which they belong.

I suggest that strands of queer theory and certain faith traditions, in fact, share similar cosmologies of failure that might make this space of failure a productive one. By including protagonists who are at an age where they are not expected to reproductively contribute – the protagonist in *Kid Victory* is in high school and the daughters in *Head Over Heels* are unwed in a culture where marriage is expected as a signification of reproductive maturity – and therefore avoiding the question of reproductive futurity, these musicals allow for space to explore the shared ideologies of failure between queerness and faith.

Though many media depictions of Christianity highlight pastors and organizations who emphasize what is known as a “prosperity gospel” – the belief that those who follow the Christian faith tradition will receive material and social benefits as a result of doing so – not all religious leaders guarantee that practicing Christianity promises success; in fact, theological scholars like Beverley Clack, Christa Marika Rose and John H. Navone, S.J. point towards the appropriateness of a theology of failure, configuring failure as a defining characteristic of the Christian faith tradition.⁴⁶⁵

Marika Rose points out that “for Christian theology Christ cannot be grasped except in and through the ruptures, the failures of the church.”⁴⁶⁶ The act of salvation on which Christians base their faith was possible only through a series of failures, beginning with the first humans’

⁴⁶⁵ Negative theology also exists, and pairs interestingly with Edelman’s negativity – that strain of theology is pushing against positivist interpretations of the Divine, suggesting that the Divine’s divinity is conferred in direct proportion to its unknowability – but I do not engage it here. Beverley Clack, “Against the Pursuit of the Snazzy Life: A Feminist Theology of Failure and Loss,” *Feminist Theology* 22, no. 1 (2013): 4–19; Christa Marika Rose, “A Theology of Failure: Ontology and Desire in Slavoj Žižek and Christian Apophaticism” (Doctoral Dissertation, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2014), <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1779546547/>; John J. Navone, *A Theology of Failure* (New York: Paulist Press, 1974).

⁴⁶⁶ Rose, 199.

indiscretions (discussed later) all the way to the technical failure of the ministry of Christ both in his own lifetime (scholars frequently cite the story of Jesus failing to impress the citizens of his hometown as an example of this) and in the death that marked the social and political rejection of his ministry.⁴⁶⁷ In an online offshoot of the *Journal of Interreligious Studies*, Randall Frederick points out that the journey of God’s people is marked by failure throughout the Bible – “theology,” he suggests, “is dependent on failure.”⁴⁶⁸

Edelman’s project was, in part, dedicated to exploring the death drive as an essential element of queerness. The determining forces of positivity that made society into a coherently organized, functional structure did so at a cost: everyone and everything was required to distill to a legible version of themselves that served the broader social project. The death drive is the space of grief and loss for all the elements lost in this act of simplification, the equal and opposite reaction mutually constituting the “norm” of social positivity – the reality of the world-that-is is, Edelman suggests, always haunted by the shadow of the world-that-is-not. The Christian faith tradition shares this understanding of a world ever divided from what it could be through the concept of original sin. In Christian mythology, the first humans were placed in a garden, a world in perfect balance, and were told not to eat from a specific tree. They chose to eat from the tree and, in so doing, undid the perfect balance of the world and were cast out from the garden; no human who followed would ever have the chance to live in that world of balance again, both because their ancestors made a choice that barred them from it and because that

⁴⁶⁷ For expanded versions of this argument, see Navone or the portions of Rose engaging Steven Shakespeare’s unpublished paper, “Into the Vomitorium: Diseased Sacraments in Black Metal and Queer Theology.”

⁴⁶⁸ Randall Frederick, “Theology of Failure, Pt. 3,” *State of Formation* (blog), December 19, 2013, <https://www.stateofformation.org/2013/12/theology-of-failure-pt-3/>.

choice predisposed all humans to disorder. In the Christian worldview as well as Edelman's queer one, then, the world-that-is is always haunted by the world-that-was or world-that-could-have-been. Neither Edelman's negativity nor Christian theology offers hope of a reconciling of those two worlds in the present era.

Both schools of thought suggest that their adherents – the queer keepers of the death drive, Christians – have a responsibility to live in a way that honors the version of the world that is lost, even as they know that it cannot be found again. (Christian theology includes a belief in an eventual remaking of the world to return it to the world-that-should-always-have-been, but that event is depicted as occurring after a significant break in the current social structure rather than as an evolution of it.) To be queer and/or to be Christian is, to a degree, to fail at belonging to the current world. Practitioners of queer theology emphasize that Christianity is a fundamentally queer religion; since that argument has been made at length and in a variety of ways elsewhere, I will not reiterate it extensively here.⁴⁶⁹ The shared reality of living in an identity that is not only socially Othered but calls its members to self-selected Otherness, however – to be “in the world, but not of it,” as both theologian Mark Larrimore and Halberstam describe their respective populations – is worth calling attention to.⁴⁷⁰ In both worldviews, being excluded from the world at large is an inevitability, but also a privilege; perhaps this is triply true

⁴⁶⁹ See, for example, Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Janet R. Jakobsen, *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance*, ed. Ann Pellegrini (New York, 2003).

⁴⁷⁰ Kathleen T Talvacchia, Mark Larrimore, and Michael F Pettinger, *Queer Christianities: Lived Religion in Transgressive Forms* (NYU Press, 2014), 11; Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, A John Hope Franklin Center Book (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 11 – the actual quote there is “in but not of it.”

for those queer people of faith triply excluded from the broader community, queer community, and communities of faith in turn.

Head Over Heels and *Kid Victory* are, in some ways, failed musicals. Neither received wild commercial acclaim or near-universal critical appeal – both, in fact, earned some fairly scathing (and, perhaps worse, dismissive) reviews. More importantly, however, both musicals failed to engage with formal conventions of musical theatre. In the case of *Kid Victory*, that included breaking one of the golden rules of musical theatre: that when something matters, characters sing. Luke, the protagonist, never sings, though everyone around him does. *Head Over Heels* makes no attempt at stylistic continuity between book and lyrics, pairing Go-Go's songs with spoken verse in iambic pentameter. (As Scott McMillan points out, music and dialogue never transition seamlessly – even the most integrated of musicals cannot hide the seams between song and dialogue, and those modes of communication offer different kinds of information to the audience – but the integrated musical is an enduring myth precisely because most book musicals *do* attempt a degree of continuity between the way the characters speak and sing.)⁴⁷¹

This second conventional failure is no doubt tied to the first critical and commercial one, but it is this second failure that brings to mind Halberstam's argument that success is defined contextually; if one's goal is not to replicate the current context, then succeeding in accordance with the guidelines of that context does not actually help one towards one's goal. Halberstam's solution to the inevitability of queer failure was not to try harder to conform to social standards, but to revel in "failing well, failing often, and learning, in the words of Samuel Beckett, how to

⁴⁷¹ McMillin.

fail better."⁴⁷² Choosing not to mark conventional success as a goal allows the queer subject to choose different goals more in line with their own worldview and wellbeing. The same, theological scholar Beverley Clack suggests, is true of Christianity; Jesus, the central figure of the faith, failed so fully at conforming to the social and religious ideals of his community that He was killed for it. "The cross marks the failure of Christ's ministry," Clack explains, so "the cross raises the whole issue of how we understand failure in the first place. Rather than the 'failure' to achieve, it confronts us with the consequences of failing to love, to empathize, to respect and to care for the other" – to, in other words, acknowledge that the inevitability of failure still leaves space to choose which failures to embrace.⁴⁷³

I am not suggesting that *Kid Victory* and *Head Over Heels* fail in their role as musicals depicting young QPoF; both offer new ways of conceptualizing the subgenre. I *am*, however, noting that the musicals make unconventional choices about the failures they choose to embrace, and those choices may lead to their efficacy being greater for queer audiences rather than as bridge-building efforts towards straight ones.

Kid Victory (2017)

Kid Victory tells the story of Luke, a teenager who has recently returned home to Kansas after spending nearly a year being held captive by a charismatic former history teacher in a basement on a private island. Both the timeline and characters are unstable. The musical's narrative action moves between the present (in which Luke is attempting to make peace with living in his old life after his time away, largely through the help of Emily, a divorced mother and shop owner in the community who does not place on him the same pressures as his worried

⁴⁷² Halberstam, 24.

⁴⁷³ Clack, 17.

mother and father) and the past (depicting time spent chatting with his future captor, Michael, on an online boat-racing game they both enjoyed and scenes of both intimacy and abuse in Michael's basement). An ensemble doubles (and, for some actors, triples) as various members of Luke's community (largely people who attend the same church as his parents) and Luke's internal chorus, manifestations of his anxiety almost always present on the periphery of the onstage action. In musicals, songs generally offer insight into a character's internal reality; Luke's inability to process the trauma through which he has gone is evidenced in the fact that Luke does not sing.

The off-Broadway musical ran at the Vineyard Theatre in 2017 from February 1st to March 19th in a production directed by Liesl Tommy and choreographed by Christopher Windom. It featured music by John Kander and a book and lyrics by Greg Pierce, who conceived the original story after extensive research into kidnapping cases. Critics seemed unsure what to make of the musical, generally expressing fascination (if sometimes distaste) with the subject matter but disapproval of the "muddled fuzziness" of the plot's execution in musical form.⁴⁷⁴ Some, like Adam Feldman and Joe Dziemianowicz, note that while the songs are adequately written, the story does not feel as if it needs to be told via musical.⁴⁷⁵

A contributing factor to the resistance to *Kid Victory* as a musical is the result of a perceived incongruity between *Kid Victory*'s subject matter and the expected tone of the musical form. In many ways, the multiple failures within *Kid Victory* make the musical feel hopeless. Almost every adult in Luke's life fails him, proving unable to give him what he wants or needs

⁴⁷⁴ Ben Brantley, "The Boy's Rescued. He isn't Free," *New York Times*. February 23, 2017, C6.

⁴⁷⁵ Adam Feldman, "Kid Victory" *Time Out New York*, March 1-7, 2017, 48; Joe Dziemianowicz, "Kid Victory," *nydailynews.com*, Feb 22, 2017.

from them. Religion fails in the musical – attempts to appeal to religion as a source of either authority or comfort repeatedly fall flat (though the musical’s approach to religion is more nuanced than it initially appears). Queerness, too, frequently operates within a negative space, with Luke’s first attempt to reach out to a potential partner ending with a year of kidnapping and leading to flashbacks that inhibit his subsequent attempts. As Halberstam points out, however, queer failure sometimes must “lose...the idealism of hope in order to gain wisdom and a new, spongy relation to life...”⁴⁷⁶ Luke’s triumph in this musical is a queer triumph, not a reaching towards the future or growing from the past but a reclaiming of the present moment, of the necessity of simply taking time and space to find oneself. The musical invites audience members to enter into a space of productive tension, daring them to withstand the challenge of living in mystery without the satisfaction of easy answers. It is an experience vital to both queer experiences and the mystery inherent in Christianity, but this musical does not make explicit the link between the two.

Failure and Faith

Feldman stated the musical’s tension with faith effectively when he asserted that “*Kid Victory* implies that Luke’s stifling Christian community feels, to him, like a different kind of dungeon from the one he has escaped.”⁴⁷⁷ From the musical’s opening moment, the ensemble of the Fellowship (the way Luke’s parents refer to their fellow parishioners at Heavenly Day) are closely aligned with the internal voices Luke carries after his year in captivity. Rather than a wholesale rejection of religion, however, *Kid Victory* engages in a complicated exploration of the relationship between personal and externally enforced beliefs through its exploration of Luke’s

⁴⁷⁶ Halberstam, 1-2.

⁴⁷⁷ Feldman, “Kid Victory.”

sometimes religiously informed trauma. In the world of a character struggling to find his own identity after a lifetime of having identities forced upon him, the positive elements of religion in *Kid Victory* are those that honor a sense of mystery.

In the opening number, “Lord, Carry Me Home,” the audience first sees Luke chained to a basement wall before the Fellowship overtakes the stage singing a hymn of deliverance:

Lord, carry me home
 Lord, carry me home
 It was cold in the storm
 But your love kept me warm
 Oh Lord, carry me home⁴⁷⁸

The action onstage does seem to suggest a miraculous deliverance of some kind (the stage directions describe that Luke’s “restraints fall away and he leaves his cell”) but the chorus’ abrupt shift from a soaring choral hymn to sharp accusations as they instantly transform into the voices in Luke’s head casts them – and, therefore, their hymn – in an eerie light.⁴⁷⁹ The fact that a later flashback revealed that Luke’s rescue was not, in fact, miraculous or really a rescue at all but rather a choice on his captor’s part also calls into question the veracity of the Divine; if “miracles” that happen before the audience’s eyes are untrue, what is the possibility that less visible religious experiences are real? While the answer might seem to be a foregone conclusion – none, of course – *Kid Victory* is actually much less interested in reaching conclusions than in living in the space between question and answer...and honoring characters (and faith systems) with the ability to do so.

In the Vineyard staging, the emotional dissonance prompted by the ensemble’s shift in character remained when the ensemble members returned to their Fellowship personas to sing

⁴⁷⁸ Greg Pierce, "Kid Victory" (unpublished script, February 2017), 4.

⁴⁷⁹ Pierce, 4.

the hymn once more, as their postures of worship – arms extended, taking up space – also became postures of physical intimidation when they infringed on Luke’s personal space.⁴⁸⁰ Doubling the Fellowship members as the intimidating voices in Luke’s head ensures that the Fellowship is immediately suspect and remains so throughout the musical (in spite of the fact that no one in the Fellowship ever does or says anything that could be interpreted as sinister, just out of touch). The fact that the Fellowship members are only threatening in relation to the events associated with Luke’s kidnapping foreshadows the spiritual element of Michael’s abuse.

It is in the first full scene in Michael’s basement – a third of the way through the musical – that some of the musical’s correlation of anxiety and religion begins to be justified. Michael gives Luke a notebook in which to write down the daily history lessons he will provide, explaining that “pretty soon, every single line of that’ll be covered in *Truth*. Think of it as your new bible.”⁴⁸¹ Flashbacks throughout the musical suggest Michael’s disdain for religion. Michael corrects Luke when he compares the paradise the Vikings sought to the Garden of Eden – “No, Eden’s a myth. They’re dreaming of North America, probably around New Foundland,” he explains.⁴⁸² When Luke makes a reference to Samson, Michael is playfully dismissive of his “magic hair.”⁴⁸³

⁴⁸⁰ *Kid Victory*, book and lyrics by Greg Pierce, music by Fred Kander, Vineyard Theatre, New York, N.Y., March 11, 2017, accessed through The New York Public Library's Theatre on Film and Tape Archive.

⁴⁸¹ Pierce, 29.

⁴⁸² Pierce, 38.

⁴⁸³ Pierce, 54.

Michael also throws Luke's parents' religious beliefs at him as an explanation for why they would not want him back even if he returned – “They've forgotten they ever had a son. They're in Pew Five of the Church of the Heavenly Day, singin' their hearts out.”⁴⁸⁴ Michael implies that Luke's decision to run away with a man would inhibit Luke's parents' abilities to take him back if he returned home, playing on the cultural assumption that all people of faith are homophobic. Luke seems to have internalized this message, explaining later to Emily (the shop owner for whom Luke works) that his father is “ashamed of” him.⁴⁸⁵ There is, however, no evidence that previously experienced conflict between his faith and sexuality or that his parents are concerned about his sexuality (for religious reasons or, to some extent, at all); what little conflict the musical offers between queerness and faith is externally imposed by the story's antagonist, suggesting that such a conflict does not belong.

The only potential moment of real narrative tension between queerness and faith is when Suze, Luke's ex-girlfriend, expresses that she thinks God was “whispering a warning in [Luke's] ear” in the week leading up to his disappearance because Luke was acting strange, a change in behavior explained in the following scene when Luke tells Michael that his girlfriend is getting upset that he is choosing not to spend time with her, instead (unbeknownst to Suze) using that time to be online with Michael.⁴⁸⁶ If the scenes had been presented in the opposite order – Luke joking about his angry girlfriend before Suze offered a very sincere theory about God warning Luke of impending danger – the moment might have read as poking some sort of fun at Suze's

⁴⁸⁴ Pierce, 29.

⁴⁸⁵ Pierce, 32.

⁴⁸⁶ Pierce, 50.

religious naivete. Given that the scenes are in their current order, however, Suze's analysis is simply later revealed to be off-base.

That does not mean that the musical is wholly uncritical of Christianity. *Kid Victory* sets up a dichotomy early on between the mom's stifling Christianity (and attendant small-mindedness) and Emily's cool, accepting atheism when Luke suggests applying for a job at the Wicker Witch of the West and his mother replies "Oh no, definitely not. That's that woman Emily with the unpronounceably Slavic last name...Mrs...I won't even try, I'd hurt myself."⁴⁸⁷ She goes on to explain that Emily's businesses never last for long, nor do her many intimate relationships with the men of the town. The mom's xenophobia and slut-shaming immediately flags her to the (presumably largely liberal) audience as someone not to be trusted and sets Emily up as a town outsider, marking her as the plucky underdog with whom the audience might identify before she even appears on stage.

Luke's mother uses faith both as a shield (providing easy topics of conversation to avoid more difficult questions of where he has been) and as a point of connection with a son who she believes used to share her faith and her close connection to their faith community. The fact that the Fellowship's prayers for Luke, in her mind, were part of God's deliverance of her son means that he *must* want to meet with them; it is her singing "on the day of judgment, I'll be ready" – a snippet of a hymn, presumably one they sing at church – that calls attention to the potential judgment of the churchgoers and leads to Luke initiating the conversation that culminates in his refusal to attend his welcome home dinner. The narrative conventions of the nearly omnipresent Fellowship members/internal chorus means that they are present in the space anyway, and the

⁴⁸⁷ Pierce, 8.

mom’s reenactment of their prayer circle (the reason, among others, she suggests that “the least [Luke] can do is allow these wonderful people who poured their hearts into the search for [him], to express how happy they are to see [his] face”) makes them seem a little kooky, with Fellowship members adding unnecessary details like the fact that they were wearing hats.⁴⁸⁸ The lyrics drive home the off-putting simplicity of the Fellowship’s faith, with awkward construction and clunky rhymes that suggest the mom is not a particularly deep thinker:

Then a single tear fell from the sky
 Onto my wrist
 A single tear, straight from His eye
 Told me I’d been kissed.⁴⁸⁹

The depiction of religious people and religion as undesirable continues in Emily’s store, down to the set dressing – the stage directions describe that “rows of grey ‘Bird Chapels’ (birdhouses with steeples) along one wall – that’s the hot seller. The rest of the store is much more colorful.”⁴⁹⁰ Religion is tacky and boring, and presumably the purview of tacky, boring people; Emily’s world is much more exciting. This is reinforced when a customer comes in looking for a “plain white card” (as he sings) “for [his] triplets’ confirmations” and purchases a bird chapel after scolding Emily for not having a more sedate stationary selection when she is unable to fulfill his request.⁴⁹¹ He also reinforces the idea that religious people create discomfort as he presses Luke about why he might have seen him on television. (The customer never makes the connection that it was in news stories about Luke’s disappearance or return.)

⁴⁸⁸ Pierce, 10.

⁴⁸⁹ Pierce, 10.

⁴⁹⁰ Pierce, 11.

⁴⁹¹ Pierce, 13-14.

Emily's atheism (unstated aside from her character description, though she does share an anecdote in which a pastor convinced her she would go to hell if she aborted her daughter) is a counterpoint to the town's religiosity.⁴⁹² Her invocation of queerness is also the first mention of LGBTQ identities in the musical – though Emily is straight, she references that she was “kind of a dude” as a kid and describes people calling her a “Pollack bulldyke,” providing Luke with another layer of potential identification with her.⁴⁹³ This mention is interesting, in part, because it takes place in a song dedicated to describing the comfort Emily derived from her relationship with her father and his suburban lawn along with her own return to suburbia specifically, in part, to have a lawn to tend of her own. The townspeople's default Christianity seems typical (if *stereotypical*) of the suburban, middle-class small-town Kansas where the musical is set, but Emily's suburbanness seems at odds with her Bohemian flair. Still, she is different enough that it is to her, not to the amateur counselor Luke's parents have recruited from their church, that Luke begins sharing the story of his initial encounters with Michael.

While the musical's general depiction of religion is negative and often stereotypical, a closer examination reveals a privileging of not-knowing there as well. Throughout the musical, Luke never comments on his own religious viewpoint. He suggests that he is questioning his faith when he presses his father about whether he “*actually* believe[s] in God...Like...completely” (his father does).⁴⁹⁴ He identifies Heavenly Day as his parents' church

⁴⁹² Pierce, 2.

⁴⁹³Pierce, 16. Emily never says that she is straight, but she mentions several sexual partners throughout the script who are all male, and the care the character takes to clarify that the teasing was based on her gender expression rather than her relationships seems to support that reading.

⁴⁹⁴ Pierce, 56.

rather than his at one point in the script (though he calls it “our” church at another). However, his mother’s religiosity or the religiosity of the Fellowship is not an initial reason he gives for being disinterested in participating in the religious community – he expresses that reluctance as a response to his trauma. (“Where I was, there was barely any noise so...even more than just one voice is still kind of jarring,” Luke says.)⁴⁹⁵ While an actor and director could make the choice that this is an excuse, nothing in the stage directions or in the line delivery in the Vineyard’s production suggest that this is the case. It is only when his mom uses the Bible to attack Emily – “You know, Emily crossed my mind last night during Bible Study when Joyce read First Corinthians, Chapter One, Verse 27: ‘But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong’” – that Luke pushes back in any way, asking his mother to tell him what a Corinthian looks like, explaining “I don’t get why you’d spout out something from Corinthians about my best friend when you don’t have a clue what a Corinthian is.”⁴⁹⁶ Even then, it is her lack of understanding and use of the Bible as a tool of exclusion that he condemns rather than her faith specifically.

The characters whose faiths are not painted as ridiculous are those who are willing to live with a degree of ambiguity. When Luke presses further on his father’s response, asking if his dad believes that God “planned everything out,” his dad says, “I think he’s a good God, who can make bad plans.”⁴⁹⁷ Even God, in Luke's father's theology, has room for failure, and that does not mar His divinity; that interpretation is potentially frightening for someone like Luke's mother who relies on her faith for firm, encouraging answers to life's problems, but is potentially

⁴⁹⁵ Pierce, 10.

⁴⁹⁶ Pierce, 43.

⁴⁹⁷ Pierce, 56.

encouraging for someone like Luke wondering whether a lapse in judgment and a serious detour in life can be redeemed.

Similarly, Luke's ex-girlfriend, Suze, finally comes to his workplace when Luke fails to return any of her calls. Rather than attempting to pressure him to rekindle their relationship or give her answers, though, she offers him empathy and space. When she lets him know that she is praying for him, he does not react poorly, nor does he dismiss her suggestion that God warned him of the coming danger. Suze is sympathetic, in part, because her arc also ends in a holding pattern – when Luke tells her not to expect them to pick up where they left off, she sings that she is willing to wait for him even as she acknowledges that she knows the wait is futile. Suze brings up the prayer circle that Luke's mother sang about, but her recollection is not overwhelming to Luke in the same way. She produces a leaf she has kept pressed in a book, explaining, “When Gail had that prayer circle last fall around her maple tree, just before I shut my eyes, I looked down, and this was on my shoe. See? It's a schooner.”⁴⁹⁸ The leaf – which she gives Luke – is shaped like the ship he left on, like the ships he anticipates leaving to build, like the ship that brought him to Michael and brought him home. Perhaps Suze just saw the schooner and thought of Luke because he liked them, but perhaps God was passing along a more definitive – and ambiguous – sign than a raindrop. *Kid Victory* is not interested in answers, nor faith systems that cannot tolerate their absence.

Metanarratives, Pleasure and Pain

Both theologies of failure and ideologies of queer negativity are predicated upon the understanding that pleasure and pain are intimately interconnected: the present reality is always haunted by an alternative present that was lost. The current pleasure of salvation is made possible

⁴⁹⁸ Pierce, 51.

only through the pain of Christ's death, which in turn was necessitated by the complex joy and grief of human free will; there are distinct advantages to social legibility bought at the cost of a more complex identity, but there is also a queer joy in choosing to eschew coherence in favor of completeness. It is this tension with which *Kid Victory* wrestles.

Kid Victory is disdainful of metanarratives, whether religious or otherwise; the musical paints any totalizing attempt to explain the way the world works without nuance as suspect. The position initially seems to align easily with Michael's, but Michael is not exclusively interested in the provable, factual world. While he is disdainful of Eden as a paradise, Michael offers Luke another kind of paradise twice. First, during the history lesson about the Vikings, Luke argues that he is too dizzy from the drugs Michael has been giving him to either drink more (they are administered via a water bottle) or pay attention to the history lesson. Michael physically threatens Luke, but then promises Luke that "to the west of pain is a paradise...there is always pain before paradise / so only the strong, only the strong, only the strong belong."⁴⁹⁹ (This is also the attitude he asserted the Vikings had when setting out on their journey.)

The statement *could* simply mean that there will be rewards of knowledge for Luke once he works through the lesson, but the subtext – helped along in the Vineyard Theatre production by staging putting Luke on his knees in front of Michael on a mattress – is sexual. (Though it is never stated that Michael and Luke had a sexual relationship, the stage directions repeatedly describe them as being physically intimate in a way that suggests as much and the Vineyard staging suggested it further through kissing and cuddling in less volatile moments.) The second occurrence is near the end of the musical. Michael sings Luke a love song expressing the

⁴⁹⁹ Pierce, 39.

sentiment that Luke deserves someone better than him, then pulls out a handgun. He offers Luke the choice to “come with [him],” once more singing, “to the west of pain is a paradise / we will sail straight in, let them...” – offering, both text and staging imply, to kill Luke before killing himself – before Luke declines.⁵⁰⁰ Michael then shoots himself in front of Luke.

The process of moving through painful experiences to reach more positive ones occurs throughout narratives of sexuality broadly writ, as well as both LGBTQ and religious narratives. Communal knowledge around early sexual activity dictates that early sexual encounters are likely to be painful before all parties improve both skill and physical stamina. This truism is largely applied to cis women having early sexual encounters with cis men, but also to various people engaging in anal sex acts. The process occurs doubly for LGBTQ people, who media narratives suggest should expect to endure a painful coming out process before reaping the rewards of an authentic, liberated life as an "out" queer person. Many religions suggest that suffering in the present world leads to rewards or liberation in the future one. In Christianity, this point of view is both literal – martyrs, both historical and relatively contemporary, are often cited as heroes of the faith, going through the pain of death and entering an eternal paradise – and figurative, with the social ostracism that comes from being in a world but not of it considered the cost for upholding one's beliefs.

Kid Victory, like Halberstam's project, reflects the inability of tidy metanarratives to serve as a salve for current woes. Michael may or may not move on to an afterlife that is more pleasant than the world he left – the musical does not say – but Luke certainly is not finding a paradise on the other side of his trials, no matter how much his mother attempts to force him to view returning to the rhythms of his old life as such. Pain and paradise, the musical suggests, are

⁵⁰⁰ Pierce, 68-69.

not separate locations on a journey's progression, but are connected in a much more complicated way. The life to which Luke returns is the life he sought to escape for a day when he met up with Michael initially, and he describes to Emily that "There'd be whole days where we'd do whatever we wanted: read, barbeque, hang out – it was like a paradise. Until he'd get weird again."⁵⁰¹ The island was both pain and paradise, and his escape from the island is both, as well.

This relationship between pleasure and pain is frequently present in the musical, particularly as staged at the Vineyard, but the connections become more explicit as the evening continues – a potential hookup Luke contacted via a dating app, Andrew, sings about how life experiences that are not potentially both exciting *and* frightening are not worth having, and Luke's eventual entrance into Andrew's dance suggests his agreement. Their almost-kiss, however, is interrupted by a flashback to Michael that frightens Luke. From that point, the coherence of time and place grows increasingly unstable, with the musical moving quickly between timelines and sometimes placing Luke in the middle of two timelines at once, literally enacting the present and past simultaneously – a failure of the delineation between present and past.

The musical's various threads – Luke's time with Michael, his time in Emily's shop, his interactions in the living room with his mother – all end in rapid succession, each illustrating the futility of the adult's solution to the challenges of Luke's life. Michael's call to seeking the paradise to the west of the pain concludes as above. Emily's offer to run away with Luke to a commune proves to be disingenuous, as when he arrives to take her up on it she has invited her estranged daughter to return to living with her in an attempt to reconcile and is no longer willing to leave. Luke's mother's rejoinder to return to life as usual withers in the face of his revelation

⁵⁰¹ Pierce, 34.

that, while he was drugged and taken to Michael's basement from the boat ride against his will, he actively chose to be with Michael rather than returning home after an escape.

There are parallels between Michael, Emily, and Luke's mother that make both women ineffective at reaching Luke after his time with Michael. All three claim to have special intimate knowledge of who Luke is on a fundamental level without soliciting his input about the veracity of their claims – Michael promises/warns Luke that he will “never meet anyone...who gets you like I do,” Emily sings to him about “people like us” who will “never belong...to people like them [the townspeople] / we'll always be wrong,” and Luke's mother has an entire song devoted to affirming the identity of the boy Luke once was, a boy who had “brains, braces, God, girlfriends / jokes! Passions, life lightning.”⁵⁰² Michael refers to Luke as “Kid Vick” – a truncation of Kid Victory, Luke's screen name in the game where they met – and Emily and Luke's mom both also refer to him through nicknames (Lukester and Lukey, respectively) rather than his given name. They are curating the versions of Luke with which they are willing to engage.

Ultimately, it is Luke's father who manages to get through to him. “Dad,” as he is named in the script, has been a quietly supportive force throughout the show, attempting to temper Luke's mother, but he has been distant, a distance that makes Luke think he is ashamed of him. (Luke's father eventually reveals that he has been feeling guilty for having looked through his son's laptop after Luke's disappearance, as he values privacy and feels bad about having invaded Luke's.) It is in his final scenes with Luke, however, as Luke is planning to leave home to take a trip to New Foundland and seek an apprenticeship with a shipbuilder, that he makes headway at

⁵⁰² Pierce, 29; 34.

last, not by imposing an identity or worldview on Luke but by honoring his liminality. Dad refers to his son as "Lucas" rather than a nickname, and he does not claim to have any special insight into Luke in spite of having access to all the personal information on his computer. Clearly referring to materials indicating his sexual identity on his laptop, Luke says "you must've found some stuff on my computer that was kinda surprising."⁵⁰³ His dad responds, "Nope. Life pulls us every which way – who am I to ask why?"⁵⁰⁴ Luke's orientation does not seem to be of particular concern to him.

Most importantly, Luke's father does not attempt to offer suggestions for Luke's future, impose his vision for it on his son, or even demand that Luke have a firm plan. Instead, he sings:

How come nobody asks us where we are? Ever?
 Where we're going—sure...not where we are, never?
 [...]
 I've been wanting to ask you where you are, Lucas.
 Where you've been—but mostly where you are, Lucas.
 Go explore the waves, the moon,
 The world—I hope I'll see you soon
 But first I'm wanting to ask you where you are.⁵⁰⁵

Luke is desperate to be seen. When he reveals that he escaped the island only to return, he tells the story of standing outside the window of the family home on Christmas eve where his mother was sitting at the table and waiting for her to turn her head and see him. She never did, and after fifteen or twenty minutes he turned around and returned to the island. Throughout the musical Luke has been constantly yanked back to the past or pushed to move towards a recovered future for which he is not ready, for which he may never be ready. Luke's father sees

⁵⁰³ Pierce, 71.

⁵⁰⁴ Pierce, 71.

⁵⁰⁵ Pierce, 73.

him. Luke's father provides space for imagining a future but largely gives permission to be in the present, and it is that permission that finally allows Luke to communicate in the present without being traumatically returned to the past; the musical closes with Luke telling his story to his father, inaudible to the audience under the music.

While there are musicals that end unhappily as well as those with the more conventional happy ending, it is a failure of the form to end in this unresolved space, neither bringing Luke back into community or casting him out on a new adventure but stopping the story in the unstable moment of indecision. As Halberstam describes, "not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world," and the instability of failure is a reality in which the queer subject can choose to live rather than striving for a standard of success ever out of reach.⁵⁰⁶

Kid Victory's early painting of religion with a broad and mocking brush means that it could be difficult for religious viewers to be receptive to the more subtle valuing of faiths that hold space for mystery and ambiguity. Likewise, the musical's intentional questioning of the degree to which Luke and Michael's relationship was consensual – while Luke was drugged and bound at some times, he both verbally recounts and is shown enjoying some of his time with Michael, and the musical does not engage the complication of Stockholm syndrome – mean that the conversations about sexuality the musical offers are focused around consent and a pleasure/pain dichotomy rather than personal identity or attraction.

⁵⁰⁶ Halberstam, 2-3.

While a great deal of the musical's value, particularly as a queer work, is in its willingness to live with ambiguities, reviews suggest that the ambiguity around the nature of Luke and Michael's relationship in particular is difficult to swallow – Jeremy Gerard notes that *Kid Victory* is only narratively coherent if “one buys into the unsavory suggestion that sometimes Stockholm Syndrome – in which a prisoner comes to identify with his captor – is just another marker on the road to adulthood,” for example, reflecting that the material did not fully engage the problematic nature of Michael and Luke's relationship.⁵⁰⁷ There remains something unsettling about a musical that reinscribes a damaging stereotype (that older gay men are necessarily predators), but the disinterest of *Kid Victory*'s creative team in sacrificing the story they wanted to tell on the altar of respectability politics is absolutely in line with Edelman's project.

Much of the tension between queerness and Christianity centers around identity – is the gender one is attracted to the defining factor of who one is, or are one's religious beliefs more important? Does one, in a theology positing that identity is divinely conferred, risk overriding God's wishes to tack on one's own identity labels? This tension is difficult to reconcile within a narrative about the ways in which trauma disrupts one's ability to fully know oneself or be present in one's experience, except that the tension itself is a sort of trauma, the creation of an irreconcilable identity. The fact that Luke does not sing captures this reality of trauma – singing in a musical requires self-disclosure, which requires an understanding of the self – but also means that Luke is unable to offer his own answers to these existential challenges.

⁵⁰⁷ Jeremy Gerard, “Review: Steven Levenson's ‘If I Forget’ And John Kander's ‘Kid Victory,’” *Deadline* (blog), February 23, 2017, <https://deadline.com/2017/02/review-steven-levenson-if-i-forget-and-john-kander-kid-victory-1201946565/>.

Instead, *Kid Victory* offers new questions. How/is the Church prepared to deal with trauma? To what degree do experiences of religious trauma limit access to faith, and how can a faith community address those experiences sensitively and avoid enacting trauma on others by excluding them? To what degree does dealing compassionately with people who are suffering require not only the willingness to invest resources in helping them to get better but the willingness to sit with them in the reality that they might not? *Kid Victory* emphasizes the importance of meeting people not where one wants them to be, but “where [they] are.”⁵⁰⁸

Head Over Heels (2018)

Head Over Heels is a jukebox musical featuring the Go-Go's catalog of work, along with some of the solo work of Belinda Carlisle. Jukebox musicals often take one of two forms: either a retelling of the artists' lives (*Beautiful*, *The Cher Show*, *Jersey Boys*) or creating a plot around the music (*American Idiot*, *Mama Mia*). Rather than choosing either option, Jeff Whitty – the original book writer for *Head Over Heels* – decided to use Go-Go's music to help tell the story of a streamlined, queered version of *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* by Sir Philip Sidney. *Arcadia* is a 16th-century poem spanning a variety of topics from romance to politics to the court intrigue encompassing both, memorialized theatrically in James Shirley's 1640 play, *The Arcadia*. The Go-Go's are an all-female music group most popular in the 1980s, best known for songs like “Our Lips are Sealed” and “We Got the Beat” and for being pioneers of 80s pop-rock as a women's group writing and performing their own material. *Head Over Heels* engages the productive failures of dominant social systems to imagine a queer utopia, creating a picture of a world in which queerness is not merely tolerable but holy.

⁵⁰⁸ Pierce, 73.

Even before the plot reveals any of the characters' LGBT identities, the musical (both as written and especially as produced in the original Broadway production) is unmistakably queer, with patterns of dialogue recreating the quippy repartee of the drag community (including a specific reference to RuPaul's drag race spoken by Pythio, who tells Musidorus, "thou better workest"), choreography visually referencing voguing and waacking dance styles, and gender-playful costuming and dance partnering selections for the ensemble.⁵⁰⁹ Even the set design, creating the space with two-dimensional pop-up elements, was campy (a queer visual aesthetic).

Critical reception to the musical was decidedly mixed. Many critics dismissed the musical as fluff, either because of its camp sensibility – “The farcical, gender-fluid shenanigans are as campy as things get on Broadway. And that's saying something,” complains critic Frank Shek – or a perceived lack of political pop authenticity: “the sensibility here...doubles down on fluttery theatricality at the expense of raw, charged, visceral, feminist pop,” writes critic Chris Jones.⁵¹⁰ Other critics, however, loved *Head Over Heels*' queer style - “The show is an ode to female independence with the winking spirit of a Shakespearean fairy and the neon edge of a rebellious '80s teenager, teaming up to beckon people into the woods,” writes critic Kelly

⁵⁰⁹ James Magruder and The Go-Go's, *Head Over Heels* (New York: Broadway Licensing, 2018), 72. Special thanks to Kalen Stockton for pointing out the specifics of waacking in the dance vocabulary of the musical.

⁵¹⁰ Frank Schek, “‘Head Over Heels’: Theater Review,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 26, 2018, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/head-over-heels-theater-1129877>; Chris Jones, “‘Head Over Heels’ on Broadway Has a Breezy Plot That Can’t Keep up with the Go-Go’s,” *Chicagotribune.Com*, July 26, 2018, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/theater/sc-ent-head-over-heels-broadway-review-0727-story.html>.

Connolly.⁵¹¹ In a review describing the musical as a “queer Broadway hit,” Tim Deeman says that “*Head Over Heels* is a raucously choreographed (by Spencer Liff) joy—intelligent, winningly comic, and surprisingly-for-Broadway radical when it comes to its presentation of gender and sexuality, with its central love story a lesbian one.”⁵¹² Few reviews were lukewarm, the musical inspiring either delight or disdain.

The rare exception was that of *The New York Times*’ Ben Brantley, whose review prompted controversy when he made light of Pythio’s gender, intentionally misgendering the oracle as “she” rather than “they.”⁵¹³ It is Brantley’s review that situates *Head Over Heels* in historic queer theatre tradition, suggesting that the musical “is at heart a tamed version of the period spoofs made popular decades earlier by drag artists like Charles Ludlam and, later, in floor shows at the Pyramid Club.”⁵¹⁴

It is appropriate to the musical’s historical moment that gender (rather than sexual orientation) prompted the central controversy around the production. *Head Over Heels* ran on Broadway from 7/26/18 to 1/6/19, meaning that most of its development process took place in a U.S. with certain established rights for cis LGB people (the musical opened at Oregon

⁵¹¹ Kelly Connolly, “Broadway’s ‘Head Over Heels’ Is a Giddy Neon Anthem of Acceptance: EW Review,” *Entertainment Weekly*, July 26, 2018, <https://ew.com/theater/2018/07/26/head-over-heels-broadway-review/>.

⁵¹² Tim Teeman, “Their Lips Aren’t Sealed: The Go-Go’s Score a Queer Broadway Hit in ‘Head Over Heels,’” *The Daily Beast*, July 27, 2018, sec. arts-and-culture, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/their-lips-arent-sealed-the-Go-Gos-score-a-queer-broadway-hit-in-head-over-heels>.

⁵¹³ Ben Brantley, “Review: Ye Olde Go-Go’s Songs Hit the Renaissance in ‘Head Over Heels,’” *The New York Times*, January 6, 2019, sec. Theater, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/26/theater/head-over-heels-broadway-review-Go-Gos.html>.

⁵¹⁴ Brantley, “Review: Ye Olde Go-Go’s.”

Shakespeare Festival weeks after *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the Supreme Court ruling that made marriage equality – and therefore access to spousal benefits – the law of the land), but fluctuating rights for trans and gender diverse citizens. The highest-profile of these included the question of whether trans people were allowed to serve in the military; on June 30, 2016, the Pentagon announced that people who were transgender would be allowed to serve openly in the US military, a policy President Donald Trump began attempting to repeal beginning with a series of Tweets on the subject in July 2017. (The ban went fully into effect after the musical closed.) The year leading up to *Head Over Heels*' opening also featured other significant milestones for trans rights, with the District of Columbia becoming the first place in the United States to allow people to choose a neutral gender designation for their drivers' licenses in June of 2016 and the first election of an openly trans candidate to a state legislature (Danica Roem, of Virginia) taking place in November 2017.

Head Over Heels takes place in an ancient world over which the Greek pantheon holds power, marking it as the only musical in the present study that does not operate within the religious framework of Christianity. The gods themselves operate at a distance, communicating through the intervention of local oracles empowered to both share messages and effect supernatural change. The use of this religious system in the musical likely has different effects for different audience members based on their personal experiences and beliefs. The Greek gods feature prominently in both classic literature and contemporary popular culture (Disney's *Hercules* or Rick Riordan's bestselling Percy Jackson book series, for example), so they are familiar to many audience members as literary characters. For Hellenists, it is an unusual moment of representation. For Christian audience members, however, *Head over Heels* also

includes opportunities to read specific appeals for a more equitable, just, and queer faith system afforded boldness under the plausible deniability of allegory.

The Arcadians explain that their kingdom operates by the order of “the beat,” a rhythm passed on by the gods – “of their truth it’s a sign,” Mopsa sings.⁵¹⁵ The company describes how the beat structures Arcadian life, putting in motion the changing of seasons and crop cycles and dictating social expectations, their “nation made strong by brilliant design.”⁵¹⁶ There is nothing unusual about the Arcadians’ theology (aside from its musicality) – most cultures who hold a belief in a higher power believe that that higher power affects the natural world and has preferences for the ways the people in it live their lives – but at a moment in the United States (a country without an official religious system) when Christian theology is frequently obliquely if not explicitly used as justification for acts of policy, there is a stickiness to the celebration of a country guided by divine rule passed down through the king’s dictates. The musical’s original design strengthens this association with the divine right of kings, with costume designer Arianne Phillips dressing the principals in vaguely Elizabethan clothing rather than something more conventionally Grecian. The dialogue also strengthens contemporary associations when the queen, Gynecia, explains that

Too many turns of the hourglass make
Us forget the unscripted pleasures of
Free-feeling youth and doth render us all
Conservative in thought and policy.⁵¹⁷

⁵¹⁵ Magruder and The Go-Go’s, 2.

⁵¹⁶ Magruder and The Go-Go’s, 2.

⁵¹⁷ Magruder and The Go-Go’s, 7.

In an interview with Go-Go Jane Wiedlin, reporter Jim Farber noted that “she believes the messages the show sends are well suited the times. ‘All the strides we’ve made towards equality have been slipping away lately,’ [Jane Wiedlin] said. ‘Now, more than ever, we need to give people hope and happiness – at least for a couple of hours.’”⁵¹⁸ While *Head over Heels* could be interpreted as frothy escapism, there are myriad parallels with the political and religious climate in the contemporary United States for audience members interested in seeing them. The Arcadians think that the gods have dictated a rigid structure for their country’s Beat, but they learn they are mistaken; it was humans who chose to take what they were given and use it for exclusionary purposes. A more inclusive Beat is far more pleasing to the Divine.

Musidorus the Messiah and the Queer Christ

The world of *Head Over Heels* is a world not just of failure, but of *productive* failure. Musidorus fails to conform to social standards, but that does not actually prevent him from being happy or contributing to the story. On the contrary, the musical configures Musidorus as a messiah of sorts, one with extensive parallels to the Christian Messiah. The Judeo-Christian faith traditions place particular value on shepherds – many of the heroes of the faith were shepherds, and God is frequently cast as a shepherd in metaphors. Musidorus begins his personal journey wandering in the wilderness before taking action, leaving behind his profession to take on the role of a savior. Pythio – this time in the form of an owl (Christ’s ministry was also begun with a bird, as a dove landing on Him after His baptism denoted God’s Blessing) – finds Musidorus in the woods and advises that the young man should

...let Musidorus the shepherd die,
So like the Phoenix he may be reborn

⁵¹⁸ Jim Farber, “‘This Play Is Full of Firsts’: Behind the Groundbreaking Go-Go’s Musical,” *The Guardian*, July 24, 2018, sec. Stage, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/jul/24/Go-Gos-musical-head-over-heels-broadway>.

To win Philoclea and moreover
Save her family – and Arcadii gureda.⁵¹⁹

Gender-bending hijinks are, as Musidorus points out, a narrative staple – “Regender myself / in a flowing wig and garments? / ... How classic.” – but the exchange also foreshadows a journey with parallels to Christ as Musidorus changes his form to enter and save the world of those he loves best, earning their love in turn at the cost of ultimate personal death. Some iterations of the Apostles’ Creed (a creed important in the Catholic faith and used in some other Christian denominations) ask Christian believers to affirm that Jesus “descended into Hades” in the span of His journey between death and resurrection; the Owl foreshadows that Musidorus will go to Hades as well.⁵²⁰ In the narrative of Jesus beginning His ministry, He quickly gains a small group of followers and close friends – often referred to as His disciples – and deals with their bickering about who He likes best among them; Musidorus quickly wins the royal family over by slaying a lion threatening them (a feat also used by Biblical hero David to demonstrate his fitness to join a king’s nation-saving efforts) and deals with everyone in the royal family vying for his attentions. A particularly poignant parallel is the moment when Musidorus affirms to Philoclea that he is, in fact, her love, pressing her hand to his chest to feel the heartbeat she promised not to “unremember,” potentially recalling the moment Jesus invited Thomas to affirm His identity by feeling His wounds.

The narrative structure of *Head over Heels* (like the narrative structure of the Bible) depicts an extensive series of failures. In the Broadway musical version (which retains much of Whitty’s concept with a book heavily rewritten by James Magruder after the musical’s premiere

⁵¹⁹Magruder and The Go-Go’s, 38.

⁵²⁰ Versions of the Apostles’ Creed differ slightly in their language, with some saying “Hades” in that section and others using the word “hell.”

at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in 2014), King Basilius of Arcadia – father of the plain Philoclea (beloved of an unsuitable shepherd, Musidorus, who the king forbids her to wed) and the beautiful Pamela (beloved of no one as she keeps rejecting potential suitors) – receives word that their “Sov’ reign Zeus / Has decided to redistrict Greece and / Appoint fresh oracles throughout the land” and the new oracle at Delphi – Pythio – has summoned the king with the warning that “Arcadia is in peril” of losing its beat (the music gifted by the gods which structures the kingdom).⁵²¹ When the king and his porter, Dametas, visit Pythio, they (the oracle is nonbinary, though the actor who played the part on Broadway was a trans woman – the first, the program notes, to originate a significant role in a Broadway musical) offer four predictions which, should they all come to pass, will signal the end of Arcadia. “[A] permanent distemp’rature . . . caused by [the King’s] archaic, inflexible rule.”⁵²² To keep Arcadia (and the world) intact, the king collects the queen (Gynecia) and the rest of the court to travel to find the would-be usurper of the throne (the fourth of four predictions) and slay him.

Throughout the journey, each of the predictions comes to pass. Philoclea “brings a liar to bed” when Musidorus – the shepherd – dresses as an Amazon warrior, Cleophila, and joins the party after being denied Philoclea’s hand in marriage. Once Philoclea knows that Cleophila (with whom everyone in the camp is quickly enamored) is really her love, they pledge their love to each other once more.⁵²³ Pamela “shall consent to wed” and will “consummate her love – but with no groom” when she falls in love with her handmaiden, Mopsa, finally realizing why none

⁵²¹ Magruder and *The Go-Go’s*, 13.

⁵²² Magruder and *The Go-Go’s*, 18.

⁵²³ Magruder and *The Go-Go’s*, 18.

of the suitors ever suited her.⁵²⁴ The warning that “with [his] wife adult’ry [the king] shall commit” comes to pass when Basilius and Gynecia both independently arrange to have an affair with Cleophila in a cave (Basilius assuming Cleophila was a woman, Gynecia having discovered that Cleophila was not, but without recognizing Musidorus) and end up sleeping with each other, both assuming the other is Cleophila in the dark. The tradition of the kingdom is in trouble.

The story of tradition-bound elders and young people seeking a new way of being in the world is familiar, but before the young people escalate their rebellion the stakes rise higher still: a giant snake from the sky delivers the message that Zeus has assigned a new oracle at Delphi, an oracle with dire warnings for Arcadia – “no true paradise in place remains / forever” and the kingdom itself is failing, at risk of losing its beat. The message and mode of delivery potentially call to mind a famous confluence of serpents and paradise in the Christian myth of the garden of Eden.⁵²⁵ This musical does not allow a woman the opportunity to ruin paradise at the behest of a snake – as Basilius reminds Gynecia, “the protection / Of a realm doth resideth with the Male.”⁵²⁶

For the first few moments of the plot, there is nothing about *Head Over Heels* to suggest that it will be anything more or less than the fairytale it appears to be, with the romantic subplot between the younger daughter and her beloved foreshadowing some reversal of the older princess’ pride in which the lowly shepherd is ultimately set up as the patriarch of the people – Basilius’ declaration of his own competence immediately calls his efficacy as a ruler into question, but not the efficacy of men as the ruling population. Gender is not that simple in *Head*

⁵²⁴ Magruder and The Go-Go’s, 18.

⁵²⁵ Magruder and The Go-Go’s, 14.

⁵²⁶ Magruder and The Go-Go’s, 27.

Over Heels, however, and the Divine is not as convinced of the king's infallibility as Basilius is. Pythio, the oracle, soon reveals themselves as "a non-binary plural," "neither he nor she, but...they."⁵²⁷ The oracle delivers their prophecies, but the king fails to heed the oracle's warning that it is his adherence to inflexible tradition that risks the kingdom.

This is evidenced shortly before the royal court begin their journey. Musidorus comes to ask for Philoclea's hand and attempts to propose to her with music – as is the way of the people of Arcadia – but the king makes him nervous and rushes him so that he repeatedly bungles the song. The king is frustrated with Musidorus' inability to mind the beat and enter on time and on key, and because it is a musical Musidorus' failure to sing properly *should* indicate that he is an inappropriate partner for Philoclea, especially since they have not indicated an ability to sing together (which, in musicals, is an important marker of suitability).

Once his position in the family becomes complicated, Musidorus returns to solitude in nature to seek the guidance of the Divine, asking the Owl to help him extricate himself from his tenure as Cleophila as tensions mount; as Christ receives no respite praying in the garden of Gethsemane for God to "take this cup from [Him]" and release Him from the obligation of the mortal death He is about to endure, the Owl does not offer Musidorus an exit strategy. Instead, he must see the plan through to its fatal conclusion.⁵²⁸

Basilius slays Musidorus when Philoclea reveals that Cleophila has been Musidorus all along, assuming that Musidorus is the usurper to the throne about which the prophecy warned. (That prophecy is the last not to be fulfilled at that point in the script.) Stricken with grief at his wife and daughter's reaction to his killing of Musidorus, the king yields his crown to Gynecia,

⁵²⁷ Magruder and *The Go-Go's*, 16.

⁵²⁸ Luke 22:42, Mark 14:36, NIV.

making way for a better “king,” fulfilling the final prophecy. As predicted, the earth stops, “chaos and mass extinction” coming to pass - Basilius has failed to prevent the prophecy from coming to pass, failed to protect his kingdom and his crown, failed to preserve Arcadia’s beat.⁵²⁹ Musidorus’ death at the king’s hand (and the subsequent fall of the kingdom) seems to indicate the failure of his attempt to save Arcadia as the death of Christ appears to mark the total failure of His ministry, His inability to effect lasting change.

As Christian theology dictates that it was, in fact, Christ’s *death* that was the act that offered salvation, however, Musidorus’ death and its role in catalyzing the fulfillment of all four prophecies ultimately saves Arcadia not from momentary failure, but from long-term stagnation and inequality. Taking her position as reigning monarch in a ruined world, Gynecia declares:

“No true paradise in place
remains forever” spake the Oracle.
We must craft a beat anew from our hearts
Within, and let a new Arcadia
Commence – one more tolerant and generous.
Let us pray that the heavens will steer us
From suffering and injustice, and guide
Us to our better, nay, to our best selves.⁵³⁰

Gynecia looks to the Divine for guidance in crafting a better world to replace the world now lost, and it appears that this was always the plan of the Divine – not that Musidorus would die metaphorically and embody Cleophila to change the kingdom, but that a momentary change of state to intervene would lead to true death to save the world, to prompt a reaching out towards justice, hope, and peace. Like Jesus, Musidorus subverted prophetic and narrative expectations by creating change through his own death rather than through a military conquer or other more

⁵²⁹ Magruder and The Go-Go’s, 94.

⁵³⁰ Magruder and The Go-Go’s, 95.

obvious military engagement. Like Jesus, Musidorus is resurrected in a form not immediately recognizable to his loved ones, and his resurrection prompts disbelief.

Musidorus is, at first glance, a conventional choice for a Messianic figure. He is a man – a white, blond man in the original cast, like many pop culture Christ images – and appears cisgender and heterosexual, offering a familiar sort of savior and a contrast to the Otherness of Pythio’s queer quasi-divinity. The fact that his journey entering the society of the people he will save involves transforming into a woman rather than taking on human flesh complicates this matter, adding an additional wrinkle: Musidorus can be read as a very clear parallel to the Messiah...a queer one.

It would be possible for Musidorus’ resurrection and Musidorus’ and Philoclea’s vow of love to serve as a bastion of cisgender heterosexuality in a world where conventional institutions – the divine right of the king, the kingdom itself, expectations that the oldest princess will wed and make heirs with a man – have all dissolved. *Head over Heels* does not allow this, however. First, the resurrected Musidorus speaks about being pulled from the river Styx and riding around “on this sweet stag who [he’s] named Hibiscus,” revealing a sweetness of his own that does not necessarily perfectly align with conventional heteronormative masculinity.⁵³¹ Second, Musidorus reveals that he is not necessarily entirely cis (though *Head Over Heels* does not engage any particular identity-based language). Near the end of the musical when everyone – the king and queen, Pamela and Mopsa, Dametas and Pythio, Musidorus and Philoclea – have coupled off and Gynecia celebrates now having four children, three daughters and a son, Musidorus corrects:

Or daughter four! For Cleophila
I should like to keep around, I think, for
Disguised as she I found the she in me,
And I’ll include then he with she, and thus

⁵³¹ Magruder and The Go-Go’s, 96.

A son and daughter both to you I'd be,
A Musidorus in totality.⁵³²

The instrument of the Divine, the closest thing the musical has to a typical young leading man, has revealed his queerness even within the container of a couple that appears to be as conventional as possible.

This *could* serve as a point of rupture for a reading of Musidorus as a parallel to Christ, but not if one is engaging with the point of view held forth in queer theology that the Christ is *always* queer. All valences of God are bigger than gender, but the Christ is additionally queer as both human and divine, both flesh and spirit, “refusing to adhere to binaries,” as queer theologians Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood suggest.⁵³³ In fact, through the lens of queer theology, Musidorus’ queerness *increases* his efficacy in serving as a stand-in for a Christ figure, as Mark Larrimore and Michael F. Pettinger assert that “[l]earning about the fluidity of queer identities deepen[s] our understandings of a God who breaks out of assigned roles and binary divisions.”⁵³⁴ Queerness, *Head Over Heels* offers, can be holy. Holy queerness can help save the world.

Failure and Faith

Though I suggest that Musidorus’ arc holds additional meaning for audience members reading him as a queer Christ figure, it is not necessary to engage religions outside the faith system of the play to experience the affirmation of queerness as a site of holiness; Pythio, the

⁵³² Magruder and The Go-Go’s, 100.

⁵³³ Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, “Thinking Theology and Queer Theory,” *Feminist Theology* 15, no. 3 (2007): 310, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0966735006076168>. See also Talvacchia, Larrimore, and Pettinger.

⁵³⁴ Talvacchia, Larrimore, and Pettinger, 55.

very spokesperson of the gods (and someone with divine powers in their own right) is nonbinary, removing any question of whether the gods in this world are accepting of queerness; the only quasi-religious figure in the musical upholds the idea that the Divine is beyond gender, always already queer. Pythio, too, is marked as living in the liminality of both spirit and flesh, taking several forms (a snake-person, a human version of the Oracle, an owl) throughout the musical. Pythio also suggests that failure is often the precondition for legible divinity; they reveal near the musical's end that they were once named Mira and married to Dametas, who cast them out after they gave birth to Mopsa and revealed that they were struggling with their gender identity. The failure of the family unit led to the circumstances that gave Pythio the power to effect kingdom-wide – in fact, global – change.

Head Over Heels has no direct discussion of religion. The gods are factually present, their oracle is physically empowered to change the world, and there is some discussion about what kingdom qualities can maintain the divinely given beat, but there is never any interrogation of whether a character's actions are in line with the religious precepts of Arcadia's faith system. More specifically, there is never a moment at which queerness and faith are held in tension, and (among the younger generation, at least, Dametas' poor reaction to Pythio's coming out aside) never a need to explain or justify queerness. Pamela, for example, is *surprised* that liking women is an option, but neither she nor anyone else is negatively taken aback by it, and everyone of all genders seems to fall for Cleophila (though Gynecia knows Cleophila is a man in disguise, just not which man.)

One could choose to interpret this lack of commentary as a lack of activist work, but in light of the way queerness is supported by the Divine throughout the narrative, I suggest that the musical is operating in the space of a queer theology beyond apologetics; as queer theologian Jay

Emerson Johnson writes, “religious transformation begins after apologetic arguments end.”⁵³⁵ As Johnson paints the moment of arguing for legitimacy in queer theology as a historical moment, with the present and future work of the field operating with the understanding of queer theology’s validity, *Head Over Heels* does not spend time debating whether a more equitable society is a better society but operates as if it were so. It reassures audience members that queerness is not only tolerated by the Divine but embraced – it is the job of the rest of the world to catch up.

Head Over Heels does not, ultimately, conclude by offering answers to the conundrum of how Arcadia will recraft its beat or dig into the challenges of making way for the other Arcadians who were previously cast out or ignored because they were too different; the musical ends nearly where it began, at the moment the Arcadians return home from their journey. The reiteration of a new, energized version of “We Got the Beat” in the curtain call implies that they will be successful in finding a new beat, but the musical does not offer meaningful insight into Arcadia’s future...and that is not a criticism. Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* pushes against a way of life that is constantly looking to the future at the expense of the present. Crafting queer utopias (arguably a subset of queer negativity, as utopias are, by definition, places that do not exist) does not, editor Angela Jones suggests in *A Critical Inquiry into Queer Utopias*, mean “crafting prescriptions for a utopian society—in which everyone is happy and life is ideal—but by making life more bearable in the present because in doing so we

⁵³⁵ Jay Emerson Johnson, *Peculiar Faith: Queer Theology for Christian Witness* (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 2014), 3.

create the potential for a better future.”⁵³⁶ Critics’ responses make clear, however, that the queer utopia of *Head Over Heels* does not always invite those unfamiliar or uncomfortably with its queer sensibilities to join in the celebration. That limits the musical’s possibilities as a work of intentional activism, but creating space for celebrating queer identities without centering non-queer ones is itself an activist act.

Failure is frequently painful, and the musical does not deny that fact – everyone’s pain, including that of the king as he reckons with his own folly, is taken seriously. Fear of failure or fear of pain is not, however, a reason to accept inaction when action is required. Edelman suggests that the political realm organizes the world into a cogent narrative that promises a future moment at which one will stop feeling alienated from oneself, where one’s essential self and the place one occupies in the social system will seamlessly align, but the way the political realm organizes the world means that no one will ever be *truly* able to be their true selves.⁵³⁷ The characters of *Head over Heels* ultimately come to the same conclusion Edelman does: the only way out of a system that does not serve is to break the system, in the case of *Head Over Heels* literally dismantling the world.

Chris Jones suggests that “the show implicitly argues that we should all chill out and enjoy the inclusive utopia it posits, if only as a distraction from the very un-Arcadian vistas beyond the theater’s doors,” ultimately arguing that the musical is not sufficiently political for the Go-Go’s music, but *Head over Heels*’ “inclusive utopia” is hard-won, achieved through the work of leaders willing to be self-reflexive, citizens willing to make the difficult decision that

⁵³⁶Angela Jones, *A Critical Inquiry into Queer Utopias*, First edition, Palgrave Macmillan’s Critical Studies in Gender, Sexuality, and Culture (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 2.

⁵³⁷ Edelman.

unjust stability was less valuable than the dangerous ground of asking questions and working for change.⁵³⁸

Conclusion

Kid Victory and *Head Over Heels* ran slightly over a year apart, meaning that both musicals were in development at approximately the same time, operating in similar social contexts and similarly turbulent political times. Though they differ wildly in both content and tone, both musicals reach the conclusion that neither fear of the future or regret of the past should prevent one from living in one's truth in the present. *Kid Victory* reaches this conclusion from a place of trauma and fear as Luke struggles to come to terms with both the pain and pleasures of the past year of his life; *Head Over Heels* largely does so from a space of exuberance, a younger generation living and loving freely, unaware of the implications of the older generation's former inability to do so. Both musicals acknowledge a tension between a Divine who embraces a queer space of nuance and a less dimensional, more rigid human misinterpretation of that Divine. Neither musical ends conclusively, though *Head Over Heels* comes closer musically with the inclusion of "We Got the Beat" in the curtain call. The stories remain unfinished. José Esteban Muñoz writes that "[q]ueerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing."⁵³⁹ Theologians say the same of faith.

These musicals do not devote space to a debate about the compatibility of queerness and faith, nor do they spend extensive time engaging religion and sexuality as separate concepts. Instead, they seem to declare that queerness is no longer assumed to be enough to serve as a sole

⁵³⁸ Jones, "Head Over Heels."

⁵³⁹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Sexual Cultures (NYU Press, 2009). 1.

source of conflict *or* identity for a character, and set about stories focused on other things – getting through the day, saving kingdoms, making merry in the woods. While this tactic may limit their accessibility for audience members who would benefit from more introductory-level explanations of the characters' identities or the theologies with which they reconcile them (or do not), it is refreshing for audience members who do not need such an explanation to spend time in a world where identities like theirs are not the most interesting or relevant aspect of a character.

Accordingly, the characters in these musicals do not display Craig, et al.'s qualities of resilience, but for very different reasons – the protagonist of *Kid Victory* is still in the midst of his mental health crisis until the last moments of the musical, with the road to resilience laying before him. His literal escape from his small town turned into a nightmare, and the resulting flashbacks are a trauma response rather than a coping mechanism. While Luke attempts to find and foster community in Emily, his experiences make it difficult to meaningfully connect to people around him. What *is* clear is that Luke is fighting to regain control of his life. In contrast, the queer characters in *Head Over Heels* do not require specific insulating queer resilience; their queer identities are both largely unmarked and (with the exception of Pythio's gender diversity, the persecution of which ends long before the narrative action of the musical begins) unpunished by society at large.

These musicals appear to be incredibly different from each other, and indeed they are – *Head Over Heels*' model of productive failure looking towards a queer utopia offers a vision of a universe moving towards justice, while *Kid Victory* rests in the liminality of queer negativity. Both, however, end with their characters in community – Luke with his father, the kingdom of Arcadia united once again – conscious of an uncertain future but choosing to focus on the shared present instead. “Remember now this present sweet,” Basilius advises, and there *is* a sweetness

to a theatrical present in which queer characters are allowed to simply exist without fretting about how they will continue to exist in an unfriendly world or justifying their right to do so.

Conclusion: “What May Endure, We Now Create”

The United States changed a great deal between 2004 and 2019: three presidents, a recession, a recovery. It changed more for LGBTQ people. That fifteen-year span saw flurries of activity to ban marriage equality and to achieve marriage equality and, at last, a Supreme Court ruling enforcing its legalization nationwide, and with it the legal benefits marriage confers; the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” allowing LGB people to serve openly in the armed forces; the acceptance and then rejection of openly trans armed services people; and many first-time openly LGBTQ politicians, athletes, and media personalities. Media depictions of the queer experience evolved, particularly for young people, with television shows like *Glee* offering new kinds of stories. Some faith communities clarified open and accepting doctrines and some drew even firmer lines in the sand preventing the inclusion of queer parishioners. Amidst it all, nine musicals found their way to (or off-) Broadway exploring the lives of young queer people of faith in the changing world, musicals that took the lives and problems of these young people seriously...for the most part. In the preceding chapters I have examined the musicals in this dissertation by theme; now, I put all the pieces in conversation briefly, synthesizing my findings before noting additional avenues of future research.

I do not make the assertion that the creative teams of these musicals were necessarily trying to create theatre for social change, but *my* interest in these musicals is the degree to which they are able to both inspire community dialogue leading to increased empathy with/acceptance of QPoF and offer paths forward to QPoF, especially young QPoF. The musicals that fulfilled both objectives most successfully were those that attempted to engage accurately and sincerely with the faith systems to which the characters and their communities subscribed rather than assuming that religious characters were necessarily misguided in their beliefs. Some did so, in

part, by making unambiguous statements that the Divine was real and literal within the worlds of their musical: Pythios' divine power is embodied in their shapeshifting and the realization of their prophecies in *Head Over Heels* and Mary appears to Peter in *bare*. Others simply reflected the closely-held beliefs of their characters by having those characters engage in acts seeking to communicate with the Divine or display value of and reverence for holy or otherwise religious texts (the Bible, denomination-specific faith documents, songs) outside of social settings where participating in those activities is required for maintaining one's social standing regardless of one's beliefs. Celie in *The Color Purple* and Peter in *bare: a pop opera* pray even when no one else is around and both David and Pharus in *Choir Boy* use scripture as a guiding force in their lives. In contrast, musicals like *The Prom* and *The Book of Mormon* that assume a certain deficiency on the part of people of faith are less effective at offering religious audience members a way into queer characters' narratives.

Musicals that are able to make those connections successfully are important – they aid QPoF in the difficult work of integrating seemingly disparate identities, work that is necessary for achieving a healthy self-image without having to give up important parts of one's identity (or failing to do so and facing mental health repercussions including increased risk of suicidality). They also aid the friends and family of QPoF who do not identify as such in processing and supporting the identities of their loved ones, offering reassurance that such identities can be successfully navigated. This is particularly important for nonreligious queer friends and family and cis and/or straight religious friends and family who believe that queerness and faith are inherently incompatible. Disproving this myth has import beyond small-scale interpersonal interactions: in a country that still takes many of its moral cues from mainstream Christianity (in spite of having no national religion), efforts to shift cultural opinions about the abilities of queer

people to operate successfully within religious systems are also efforts to limit religiously-informed policies and laws that would prohibit LGBTQ people (religious or otherwise) from participating fully in public life.

Queer characters face or fear persecution as a result of their orientations or gender identities in approximately half of the musicals considered in this dissertation. The musicals in which this occurs seem to defy the metanarrative that queerness was shameful and hidden before Stonewall and has slowly but steadily increased in acceptability since then. The protagonists of two of the works set the furthest away in time (*The Color Purple* and *Spring Awakening*) do not experience any negative consequences for their queerness (aside from the risk of heartbreak inherent in any romantic relationship) or concern about negative consequences. In *Head Over Heels*, the final musical set outside of a contemporary timeframe, an older character once experienced rejection for their trans identity but none of the younger generation of characters experience or anticipate negative consequences for their sexualities or gender identities. It is impossible to know whether this is because the action of these musicals is taking place outside of a social context with an expectation of coming out (and anxiety around coming out) or whether these musicals represent utopic imaginings, but it is a welcome change from conventional representation to see a character's queerness as a non-issue.

In contrast, 2011 *The Book of Mormon*, 2012 *Bare: The Musical*, 2013 *Choir Boy*, and 2018 *The Prom*, all theoretically set at roughly the same time as their premieres, feature characters who either experience or fear intensely negative consequences for their queerness. It is possible that the increased representation of queer young people in media and increased visibility of queerness in general made creators feel the need to generate work that encouraged audiences to be aware of the difficulties the queer young people in their communities faced. While *Choir*

Boy and *The Prom* suggest solutions for these difficulties in the form of positive social engagement, *Bare* offers little hope, and *The Book of Mormon* does not extensively engage with its queer character.

Queer Joy

Queer joy is not mentioned as a factor in the research on queer representation in media, but it is an element that is particularly present in the most recent musicals in this dissertation. While some critics responded negatively to the frothiness of *Head Over Heels* and *The Prom*, those musicals' romance narratives simply echo the heterosexual romance narratives that have happened so often as to become hallmarks of heterosexual musical theatre pairings. When queer stories have so often been narratives of heartbreak and persecution or, at best, inspiring tales of overcoming the same, it is heartening to watch a will-they-won't-they romance narrative of Elizabethan ladies wandering the woods. (When straight people do it without music, after all, it makes up a significant chunk of Shakespeare's comedies, and no one suggests that they are not art.) When stories of queer young people so frequently end in suicide or physical assault, it is refreshing for the central conflict to be about the very normal teenage rite of passage of the prom and for the central couple to get their dance, the same kiss-in-the-middle-of-a-crowded room that has ended countless heterosexual musical couplings.

Writing about *Head Over Heels*, critic Chris Jones complains that "the Go-Go's really deserved to be treated as serious, deeply complicated artists of the surely troubled fall."⁵⁴⁰ I suggest that treating artists seriously does not necessitate creating a serious (that is, not-fun) musical and that no utopia is apolitical, whether the sprawling utopia of a world where queerness can wrest power from the throne or the tiny utopia of a perfect prom. Jill Dolan's *Utopia in*

⁵⁴⁰ Jones, "Head Over Heels."

Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater argues that utopian performatives – moments where the audience is in accord, operating as an affective community – are powerful because they allow the opportunity to imagine a world where things are different, to “feel the potential of elsewhere.”⁵⁴¹ Dolan writes that “the experience of performance, the pleasure of a utopian performative, even if it does not change the world, certainly changes the people who feel it.”⁵⁴²

Many of the musicals in this dissertation have the potential to do important work offering QPoF reassurance that they are not alone and allowing other people to empathize with the struggles of living as someone with an identity that is so often located at the crossroads of two communities in conflict. Understanding the ways in which life can be difficult can be a powerful incentive to work to avoid causing others pain, and it can be reassuring to know that one is not alone in one’s conflict. I find, however, that there is particular value in works that approach this potential activism from the other direction, inviting the audience to co-experience characters’ joy. Not hurting people is important, but surely the greater pleasure is in being a part of a community that is actively working to uplift and encourage. Knowing others share one’s pain may be reassuring, but surely the better option is to imagine a future where that pain is minimized beneath layers of experiences of community, affirmation, and, yes, joy.

Additional Opportunities for Research

Queer joy is undertheorized as a concept in both research at large and particularly in research examining mediatized representations of queerness. While I have attempted to engage a breadth of interdisciplinary work with some depth in this dissertation, queer joy is only one of

⁵⁴¹ Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 20.

⁵⁴² Dolan, 19.

many areas requiring additional scholarly attention. My research focuses on adolescence and emergent adulthood, but musicals featuring adult QPoF are also under-researched. These musicals allow for a slight expansion of religious identities as well, as some – *It Shoulda Been You* and *What's That Smell: The Music of Jacob Sterling*, for example – include Jewish characters.

There is also an opportunity to expand this research to work in development, looking towards the future of representations of QPoF and musicals with regional followings that may offer more community-specific information. For example, *My Mother's Lesbian Jewish Wiccan Wedding* is a developing musical by David Hein and Irene Sankoff (the writing team of *Come from Away*). It tells the story of a Jewish woman from Nebraska who moves with her son to Canada to take a teaching job and falls in love with a Wiccan woman. While the Jewish woman experiences some disapproval from her mother, the main story is about navigating a blended family. There are serious moments, but it is a musical comedy framed by the narrative device of the couples' son telling their love story. In the vein of musicals with young protagonists, *Interstate* is a developing musical by Melissa Li and Kit Yan that the team describes as an “Asian-American pop-rock poetry musical” in which a transgender teenage boy affiliated with the Baptist faith community goes on a journey to meet his favorite band (which is composed of a lesbian songwriter and a spoken word poet who is a trans man). Finding developing works is challenging – they are, by their nature, not as publicly available as musicals with major productions – and as such provided a barrier to their inclusion in the present study, but the diversity present in these developing musicals makes them ripe for additional research. (The existing field is overwhelmingly Judeo-Christian, cisgender, monosexual, and largely white –

exploring developing work and work from other countries would likely offer a more interesting sample.)

New musicals are increasingly accessible, at least in fragments, through online platforms. Queer people of faith also often connect through social media, as the internet allows individuals in insular communities access to other places and people. Research into the online engagement of queer people of faith both as media consumers and in general would be useful, as would additional research exploring additional means of disseminating theatrical content in the digital age. (For example, production company StarKid makes their musicals available online.)

The role of religion in communal life varies wildly in different regions of the United States; there is ample space for research into regional productions of musicals concerning QPoF, regionally specific dramaturgical interventions in these musicals, and the way theatres in the community queer theatre movement have engaged works intersecting with faith. I anticipate that someone researching this work in the Bible Belt, for example, would find wildly different reception than someone examining it in the Pacific Northwest. There is also a need for a closer look at the engagement of actual adolescent and emergent adult QPoF with musicals reflecting their lived experience; while I have anecdotal evidence of the importance of these musicals to those populations, this project did not conduct that kind of qualitative research.

What May Endure, We Now Create

While I was conducting initial research for this project, I received the opportunity to serve as an assistant leader for a study away trip to New York City with the institution where I completed my undergraduate degree. Part of my duties involved attending plays and musicals with a group of undergraduates and participating in discussion sessions about those plays and musicals afterward. None of us knew what to expect attending *Head Over Heels*. The musicals I

had loved as a student in college offered me nonreligious lesbians next door or gay Catholic boys and men punished severely for loving who they loved, and I had picked the scraps of hope out where I could find them and been glad for the chance to see anything that seemed to have to do with me. Here, though, was a story about people for whom loving deeply and broadly was just as pleasing to the gods they worshipped as I believe it is to the God I worship, and there was no squinting to find a happy ending. It was, almost to a person, everyone's favorite show of the trip. Again and again, students – nonbinary students, fat students, queer students of various identities – reflected the deep joy of seeing their stories onstage. That's quite a feat for a jukebox musical in a completely incoherent historical setting.

My goal is that this dissertation will invite additional attention to an underrepresented and under-considered population and an art form that has the capability to share their stories in a way particularly suited to inviting audience empathy and community conversation. While these musicals were not necessarily written as opportunities for activism, individual productions can choose to use them that way, particularly with the inclusion of dramaturgical support resources and opportunities for community engagement around queerness and faith. Near the end of *Head Over Heels*, Pythios says “what may endure we now create.”⁵⁴³ Choosing to take seriously both the religious lives *and* sexual and gender identities of characters creates space to practice taking seriously the full, dimensional identities of QPoF, and as our world grows more diverse our young people deserve to see stories with people who look and love like them and to belong to communities with the cultural literacy to honor who they are. May we create a musical theatre of today and a musical theatre of the future that undertakes this work.

⁵⁴³ Magruder and The Go-Go's, 102.

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