

Musical Theater:  
Christians' Voice in the Dialogue  
Jeanette Lane

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## Musical Theater: Christians' Voice in the Dialogue

The realm of musical theater has been present in American culture for decades. This field of entertainment is one of imagination, storytelling, adventure, playfulness, song, dance, and life. Musical theater allows the audience to be carried away from the world around them – together a room full of strangers can laugh, cry, and think about what they see on stage. As stated in the text *Performing the Sacred: Theology and Theatre in Dialogue*: “Theatre is an art form that, even when performed at a crisp pace, allows for reflection and contemplation. It slows down life. It isn’t a loud assault on the senses.”<sup>1</sup> Entertainment on stage allows the audience, despite the demands of this world, to escape from the hustle and bustle of our twenty-first century lives. This ability is what makes musical theater appealing.

Significant musicals produced in the past decades include *Oklahoma*, *The Cradle Will Rock*, *Show Boat*, *My Fair Lady*, *Sound of Music*, *Rent*, and *Wicked*. Each of these shows tells a very different story, however, they each in one way or another address a particular factor in the culture of their time, and they challenge the audience to take action or react in some way. In John Jones book, *Our Musicals: Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theater*, he states: “...musicals variously dramatized, mirrored, or challenged our deeply-held cultural attitudes and beliefs.”<sup>2</sup>

This paper will be an examination of storytelling, specifically, its impact on the American culture through the medium of musical theater. Musical theater shapes,

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<sup>1</sup> Johnson, Todd E. & Dale Savidge. *Performing the Sacred: Theology and Theatre in Dialogue*. (Michigan, Baker Academic Publishing Group: 2009.), 15.

<sup>2</sup> Jones, John Bush. *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social history of American Musical Theatre*. (United States, Brandeis University Press: 2003), 3.

mirrors, challenges, and impacts the culture in which it is presented. Thus, Christians should seek to have a respected voice in the musical theater dialogue by being leaders in the field.

So often Christians today see the entertainment world on Broadway and in Hollywood as a dark and lost place. However, if musical theater is an art form that can have such a lasting impact on culture it should be one that must be reclaimed and redefined in this day and age. There once again needs to emerge writers, directors, musicians, and actors who wish to redefine what the stories of musical theater can express.

The leaders (directors, writers, producers, composers, and stage managers) in the realm of musical theater have the ability to produce stories that avoid distracting or unnecessary immorality, promote the faith life, and challenge ideals, worldviews, and areas of the twenty-first century culture that ought to be questioned. If this art form is written off in the Christian world as a field of no importance, then Christians have missed a great opportunity – it is indeed a field of impact, of change, and of lasting consequence in this day and age.

This paper will analyze the art of storytelling by examining Greek and Roman Theater, as well as Biblical parables. Then, through a brief history of significant musical theater productions we will see the progression this art form has had in America and how it intrigues, challenges, and impacts our culture. Following, interviews with current voices in this field will be discussed. Lastly, an argument will be raised that more Christians should strive to have a respected voice in this musical theater culture.

To accomplish a significant Christian impact on this field will require Christians to do more than star on a Broadway stage. It will require being difference makers in many areas of this field and capturing our audience with powerful and skillfully executed stories. The creative artist has the ability to reach his or her audience in a way that cannot be ignored. As stated by Nigel Forde: “The influence of the creative artist on the human soul, the human will, the human outlook, is incalculably great, either for good or for ill. He is the one who can say something and be heeded. Art and entertainment have always spoken louder than politics.”<sup>3</sup>

### Terms and Definitions

For the context of this paper two particular statements need to be defined and developed: worldview, and then specifically, a Christian worldview and how this point of view allows the Christian artist to tell remarkably captivating stories. These two elements will be referred to at extensive lengths in this paper.

Worldview is the first term that must be defined for the purpose of this paper. John Stonestreet in the *Christian Worldview Journal* said that a worldview is, “the framework of basic beliefs that we hold, whether we realize it or not, that shape our view of and for the world.”<sup>4</sup> He goes on to argue that *every* person has a worldview. One may not always realize it, but there are basic factors that influence the way we think, believe, and live. Yet another, and perhaps more concise definition of the term

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<sup>3</sup> Forde, Nigel. *Theatercraft: Creativity and the Art of Drama*. (Wheaton, Illinois: Harold Shaw Publishers: 1990), 3.

<sup>4</sup> Stonestreet, John. *Biblical Worldview: What It Is, and What It Is Not*. March 11, 2010. (Accessed April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2016), para 1. <http://www.colsoncenter.org/the-center/columns/call-response/14732-perspectives-biblical-worldview-what-it-is-and-what-it-is-not>

worldview is as follows: “A framework from which we view reality and make sense of life and the world.”<sup>5</sup>

A person can think of worldview as a pair of glasses or lenses that each person is constantly wearing. It is through these lenses that a particular individual views the world around them. Each pair of lenses may be different, influenced by different basic factors, but the reality remains that every individual wears a pair throughout their life. “The question is not whether one has a worldview, but which worldview one has.”<sup>6</sup> A worldview can change and develop over time based on culture, heritage, background, beliefs, and peers. Though a person’s particular worldview may change or alter, the fact remains that he will always have a framework of basic beliefs that shape his view of the 21<sup>st</sup> century world. That framework greatly affects the decisions an individual will make, the opportunities a person will seek after, and particularly in the case of this paper, the stories one writes, connects with, or finds worth sharing with the world.

Now building on this definition of worldview, it is equally important that the reader understands a working definition of the Christian worldview, and why a Christian worldview is needed in the musical theater world. For our purposes, a Christian worldview is one that “is based on the infallible Word of God. When you believe the Bible is entirely true, then you allow it to be the foundation of everything

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<sup>5</sup> Tackett, Del. “What’s a Christian Worldview?” (Accessed March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2016), para 1. <http://www.focusonthefamily.com/faith/christian-worldview/whats-a-christian-worldview/whats-a-worldview-anyway>

<sup>6</sup> Stonestreet, John. *Biblical Worldview: What It Is, and What It Is Not*. March 11, 2010. (Accessed April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2016), para 1. <http://www.colsoncenter.org/the-center/columns/call-response/14732-perspectives-biblical-worldview-what-it-is-and-what-it-is-not>

you say and do.”<sup>7</sup> As writer Stonestreet states, “a biblical worldview is not a means, like a curriculum or a program. It’s an end.”<sup>8</sup> Believing in God as our Savior, His nature, His mandate for believers, and His Word should affect everything a Christian does, says, thinks, or acts.

According to Stonestreet there are three unique characteristics of a Christian worldview that distinguish it from other worldviews: it is biblically grounded, culturally literate, and defined by hope.<sup>9</sup> Not only should the Christian study the Bible and believe in its teachings, the Scriptures should *transform* him. “Do not be conformed any longer to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is. His good, pleasing, and perfect will.”<sup>10</sup> If an individual holds a worldview that is biblically grounded the Word of God will transform him in every area of his life. In a Christian worldview “the Bible sets the stage for all aspects of life and culture. The assumptions we think and live by should be Biblical ones, and we should build on these biblical assumptions when approaching . . . the arts, human behavior, literature”<sup>11</sup> or even, musical theater. Further, “the Biblical approach to culture is to understand it, confront it, and contribute

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<sup>7</sup> Tackett, Del. “What’s a Christian Worldview?” (Accessed March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2016), para 8. <http://www.focusonthefamily.com/faith/christian-worldview/whats-a-christian-worldview/whats-a-worldview-anyway>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, para 4.

<sup>9</sup> Stonestreet, John. *Biblical Worldview: What It Is, and What It Is Not*. March 11, 2010. (Accessed April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2016), para 14, 19, 23. <http://www.colsoncenter.org/the-center/columns/call-response/14732-perspectives-biblical-worldview-what-it-is-and-what-it-is-not>

<sup>10</sup> Romans 12:2, *New International Version*

<sup>11</sup> Stonestreet, John. *Biblical Worldview: What It Is, and What It Is Not*. March 11, 2010. (Accessed April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2016), para 15. <http://www.colsoncenter.org/the-center/columns/call-response/14732-perspectives-biblical-worldview-what-it-is-and-what-it-is-not>

to it. The Bible transcends cultural trends and realities because the Bible is the context of all cultures.”<sup>12</sup> The Christian must be willing to speak truthfully into the culture in which they live. The truth that can make the Christian worldview most desirable to our culture is the defining principal of hope. The Christian does not merely hope *for* desirable outcomes, rather, he has hope *in* an all-powerful Savior and unfulfilling promises.

The Christian worldview allows for the believer to make sense of the world’s struggles and sufferings. Through such a lens a person can see hardships, death, pain, and weakness in a much different light. There can be joy in heartache, peace in death, strength in weakness, and hope for the future. These elements allow for a Christian to embrace elements of storytelling that will captivate many audiences. The Christian artist can embrace conflict in a story, because there is sin and conflict in our world. “A Biblical worldview explains the profound goodness and the profound evil that is found in the world and the human heart. No other worldview can do this.”<sup>13</sup>

### Greek and Roman Theater, and Storytelling Roots

Though historians do not know many details about the beginnings of Greek dramatics, there is evidence that some sort of theatrical experience was a prized cultural discipline from early on in their culture.<sup>14</sup> It most likely stemmed from large festivals and in some way honored their gods. A performance would occur in the center of town,

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<sup>12</sup> Stonestreet, John. *Biblical Worldview: What It Is, and What It Is Not*. March 11, 2010. (Accessed April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2016), para 21. <http://www.colsoncenter.org/the-center/columns/call-response/14732-perspectives-biblical-worldview-what-it-is-and-what-it-is-not>.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, para 26.

<sup>14</sup> Jacobus, Lee A. *The Bedford Introduction to Drama: Second Edition*. (New York: Bedford Books of St. Martins Press: 1993), 3-5.

in a large amphitheater, and it would beckon for all citizens to attend. These performances would be so spectacular that they would go on for hours on end. Audience members would even pack lunches so they could stay to watch the stories unfold, potentially for an entire day's time. It was in fifth century B.C. that Greek drama really flourished. From the Greeks came tragedy, comedy, and satire: three extremely important forms of dramatic structure that are still used in the twenty-first century. Key Greek dramatists include Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides – these are:

Three tragedians that provide us with insight into the Greek dramatic imagination. They also reveal something of our common humanity, since their achievements...shape our current dramatic practice. The Greeks give us not only the beginnings of drama but the basis of drama. We build on it today whenever a play is written [and] whenever we witness a play.<sup>15</sup>

Through development of character, theme, and story, Greek theater continues even today to impact drama.

When considering the impact that Greek theater has continued to have in this art form, it is no wonder that it too had such an impact on Roman drama. Romans told many of the same myths and stories that the Greeks shared on their own stages. They too emphasize character, theme, and story. The Romans even constructed their acting spaces in a way that was inspired by the Greeks. Just as the Greek plays developed in connection with festivals, so the Roman plays became associated with similar games

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<sup>15</sup> Jacobus, Lee A. *The Bedford Introduction to Drama: Second Edition*. (New York: Bedford Books of St. Martins Press: 1993), 40.



and festivals held in Rome several times a year. Again, the stories told at the theater were an event every citizen wanted to enjoy and take part in.

A critical development of Roman drama was the unique role music played in their productions. With Greek theater the chorus was the only musical element in the production, and it always appeared in the same function: a sung performance by a small group of individual performers. Roman drama did not include a chorus, so their use of music was much more varied, and some believe it may have resembled musical comedies<sup>16</sup>, which could be one of the first forms of musical theater. In some productions there were interludes of solo music played where just a musician would be entertaining the audience.<sup>17</sup> The role music began to play in the art of storytelling, even as early as Roman theater, is key in our later examination of American musical theater. These ancient cultures were beginning to realize that all the arts, in conjunction, have a powerful impact on their audience.

#### Scriptural Examples

Zooming out even further, in examination of human culture throughout history, it is clear that dramatic storytelling has played a vital role. Even through examination of the biblical era it is documented in Scripture that Jesus spoke to the people in his culture through parables. When Jesus began to speak in parables it was an abrupt change for him, a change that occurred in the book of Mark. Previously, he had been drawing from the Old Testament for his preaching. John MacArthur argues that when Jesus went from quoting Old Testament teachings to the usage of parables in his

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<sup>16</sup> Jacobus, Lee A. *The Bedford Introduction to Drama: Second Edition*. (New York: Bedford Books of St. Martins Press: 1993), 40.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid, 171.

message he became not only a theological or expositional preacher, but a story-teller.<sup>18</sup>

Mark 4:33-34 states: “With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.”<sup>19</sup>

Human beings were created to be story creatures. Jesus, the Son of God, knew this of our nature and thus spoke in a way that connected to his audience, through *story*.

These stories are unique for many reasons. First, the parables are often simple in context and relatable to culture. This element made the stories Jesus was sharing intriguing, and in some sense, relatable for his audience. The second element of such parables was that they did not give the people direct answers; rather, they caused the audience to ponder and look for a deeper meaning in what seemed to be a simple story. This complexity to the parables is such a key element of good storytelling. People should walk away from a story asking questions and wanting to hear more. These are the marks of an intriguing story and a talented storyteller, the ability to know one’s audience and speak in a way that will impact them.

Moving from ancient Greek, Roman, and Biblical accounts of storytelling we shift to an in-depth examination of American musical theater – a more contemporary version of the art form of storytelling. In this field an individual can see aspects of the previously mentioned storytelling techniques work together in powerful ways. We will look at a brief history of American musical theater and several key moments in this industry that allowed for this field to become pivotal in our culture.

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<sup>18</sup> MacArthur, John. *The Purpose for Parables*. (Live sermon, October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2014), para 10, <https://www.gty.org/resources/sermons/90-464/The-Purpose-for-Parables>.

<sup>19</sup> Mark 3:33-34, *New International Version*.

### American Musical Theater Highlights

As musical theater first began its rise to popularity in America in the 1900s the plots were often centered around dancing girls, silly tunes, and big musical numbers. It was not until the 1920's that this paradigm slowly began to change. This moment happened with Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein's musical, *Show Boat*. This musical was based on Edna Ferber's successful novel. When approached by Kern to make this story a musical she thought that it could not be done, but she agreed to let him try.<sup>20</sup> To accomplish this Kern knew he needed a strong partner, and so he quickly approached Oscar Hammerstein II to write the book (dialogue) and lyrics for this new production.

One of the most significant historical factors of this musical was something that never even appeared on stage – it was the influence and necessity of a remarkable producer who had the courage to fund this production. Kern and Hammerstein II knew they wanted Ziegfeld to produce this show. He was one of the most successful producers of the time. *Show Boat* was unlike anything Ziegfeld had ever produced. He had been known as “the glorifier of the American girl”<sup>21</sup> throughout his productions of successful follies, a much smaller scale comedic musical. This story he was about to bring to life on stage was indeed American, but it was not going to be a musical full of dancing girls and laughter. It was going to be real and raw, and Ziegfeld was unsure

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<sup>20</sup> Hurwitz, Nathan. *A History of the American Musical Theatre: No Business Like It*. (New York: Taylor and Francis Group, LCC, 2014), 112.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 83.

how the audience would respond. Regardless, the producer took the risk and his decision to do so was rewarding, fruitful, and lasting.

“*Show Boat* was unlike any other musical to date. It dealt with real and serious social issues: relations between races, miscegenation, spousal abuse and abandonment, the ravages of alcoholism, addictive gambling.”<sup>22</sup> Kern and Hammerstein II had a cast of almost ninety people, a full white and black cast, plus a large orchestra and demands of a huge set.<sup>23</sup> This musical was still spectacular as past shows had been, but in a new and shocking way – large musical numbers and pretty girls were not the focus of this production. The curtains opened in December of 1927 at Ziegfeld’s theater. As they closed the audience did not make a sound. Hammerstein had made a dramatic decision and chose for there to be no curtain call at the end of the production. Ziegfeld thought in that moment that he had ruined his career – that was, until the reviews were released in the morning.<sup>24</sup> *Show Boat* was a success and was a pivotal historical moment in musical theater. Michael Krueger states: “The history of American musical theatre is divided quite simply into two eras: everything before *Show Boat* and everything after *Show Boat*.”<sup>25</sup> *Show Boat* proved that serious and real content could indeed create a popular musical. The production was indeed a strong story, but the story centered around Jerome Kern’s vision for the music. Hammerstein II thought that the book of a

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<sup>22</sup> Hurwitz, Nathan. *A History of the American Musical Theatre: No Business Like It*. (New York: Taylor and Francis Group, LCC, 2014), 112.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Kantor, Michael. *Give My Regards to Broadway: Episode One*. Video clip, written by JoAnn Young, interviews by Julie Andrews, Agnes de Mille, Andy Hammerstein, and Adolph Green. (2012, Thirteen New York Public Media, aired on PBS.) YouTube.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

musical production could do so much more, and *Show Boat* was in fact a precursor to what he would accomplish with the book for his later work, *Oklahoma*.

Another excellent example of musical theater impact was the production of *Cradle Will Rock* by Marc Bernstein in the 1930s. This musical was a political satire that directly challenged the economics of the time. Set in "Steeltown, USA," it follows the efforts of a man named Larry Foreman to unionize the town's workers and combat the wicked businessman, Mr. Mister, who controls the town's factory, press, church, and social organizations. Not only did this show directly address real and current issues facing the American people of the time, it spoke directly to the working class and gave them a call to action. Bernie chose to address the economic climate head on, creating a story line that was not historical fact, but was indeed a mirror of the culture around him.<sup>26</sup>

*Cradle Will Rock* was originally a part of the Federal Theatre Project in America. It was directed by Orson Welles and produced by John Houseman. The show was to be performed at the Maxine Elliott Theatre on June 16, 1937.<sup>27</sup> Come only a few days before opening, the Works Progress Administration shut it down, and unions ordered that no musicians or cast members could perform in it. So, Marc Bernstein, the cast, and their audiences headed twenty-one blocks down to the Venice Theatre where Bernstein would perform his show from that stage with just himself and a piano. It was a sold out show. Welles and Houseman invited people off the street to come see the

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<sup>26</sup> Hurwitz, Nathan. *A History of the American Musical Theatre: No Business Like It*. (New York: Taylor and Francis Group, LCC, 2014), sections on *Cradle Will Rock*.

<sup>27</sup> Miller, Scott. *Inside The Cradle Will Rock*. (Accessed February 2016), Online: <http://www.newlinetheatre.com/cradle.html>

production for free in order to fill the new large theater space they had acquired. As Bernstein played, the cast members and musicians began to perform from their audience seats,<sup>28</sup> essentially rocking the cradle of even their own time as they had found a loophole in government and union restrictions. This was a pivotal moment in musical theater history. It showed many people what the art form was capable of accomplishing. The show opened doors, challenged artists, and made America think.

Years later, in the golden age of American Broadway Theater, a drastic change in the musical was about to take place. It was amidst the horrors of World War II that a new form of the musical entered the Broadway scene. Though the lights of Broadway were often turned off because of the fear of air raids during this time, they always promised to come back on – Broadway was one glimmer of joy in America despite the struggles of wartime.<sup>29</sup> As the war raged on, Oscar Hammerstein II had moved out of New York City and onto the quiet plains of Pennsylvania. In April of 1942, Hammerstein received a call from Richard Rodgers. The young talent wanted his help to adapt a play into a new kind of musical.<sup>30</sup> This would be a light-hearted story of love, homeland, cowboys, and Indians – it had American spirit all over it and Hammerstein was intrigued. “The resulting show [*Oklahoma*] ushered in a new era in musical theatre.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Miller, Scott. *Inside The Cradle Will Rock*. (Accessed February 2016), Online: <http://www.newlinetheatre.com/cradle.html>

<sup>29</sup> Kantor, Michael. *The American Musical Oklahoma. Episode Four: “Oh, What a Beautiful Morning.”* Video clip, written by JoAnn Young, interviews by Julie Andrews, Agnes de Mille, Andy Hammerstein, and Adolph Green. (2012, Thirteen New York Public Media, aired on PBS.) YouTube.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

*Oklahoma* was not just a strong story like *Show Boat*. In fact, it was a simple story – but it was a *story driven* show. *Oklahoma* signifies the first completely book musical in musical theater history: a show that was completely integrated in every artistic area.

When *Oklahoma* opened on Broadway in 1943 everything was truly up to date in the musical. Because the four major performance elements were so intimately connected and for the period seamlessly orchestrated and this integration flowed from the strong book elements, there would be a 25-year period where the book musical was king. *Oklahoma* set the standard by which every book musical would be judged.<sup>32</sup>

For the first time, the music and dance enhanced the story and came after the script was written. Before, even with *Show Boat*, the music had been the driving factor of the musical writing process. Rodgers and Hammerstein changed the way the musical addressed its audience – with them, musical comedies almost ceased to exist, and the story took the spotlight. “*Oklahoma* signaled the beginning of a time where well-crafted story – poignant, funny, dramatic – became the essential element of the Broadway musical.”<sup>33</sup>

The dialogue and core script of a musical is referred to as *the book*. Hammerstein decided that with *Oklahoma* the book would not be written around already composed music, rather, the score of the show would be written to complement the book. This concept, now common in the twenty-first century, was completely

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<sup>32</sup> Mroczka, Paul. *Broadway History: The Golden Age of the American Book Musical, Part 4 Oklahoma!* Online (Accessed May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016), para 10.

<http://broadwayscene.com/broadway-history-the-golden-age-of-the-american-book-musical-part-4-oklahoma/>

<sup>33</sup> Kantor, Michael. *The American Musical Oklahoma. Episode Four: “Oh, What a Beautiful Morning.”* Video clip, written by JoAnn Young, interviews by Julie Andrews, Agnes de Mille, Andy Hammerstein, and Adolph Green. (2012, Thirteen New York Public Media, aired on PBS.) YouTube.

foreign to the musical theater audiences of Hammerstein's era. Even the opening of *Oklahoma* signaled that this show was very different than what the American people were accustomed to. Prior, the opening numbers were big, flashy, and eye catching. For *Oklahoma* the curtain opened to one old lady churning butter, followed by a man singing a slow ballad. *Oklahoma* also changed the role dance played in the musical. Agnes De Mille, the choreographer, had a vision for the dance in this show. There is one particular scene in *Oklahoma* called *The Dream Ballet*. Hammerstein had originally outlined to Agnes De Mille that this dream should function like a circus. It was then that she asked him, "Mr. Hammerstein, what has this ballet to do with the play?"<sup>34</sup> Agnes recognized that this dream was more of a nightmare. It was a haunting dream, and the ballet needed to convey that. She allowed this idea – "what does this dance have to do with the play?" – to influence all her choreography for the production. For the first time on the musical theater stage dance would also play an important storytelling role for the book of this musical, instead of just adding a flashy element of girls on stage.<sup>35</sup>

Yet another and more contemporary example of musical theater's impact on American culture was the production of *Rent* by Jonathan Larson, which occurred 53 years after *Oklahoma* first premiered. This musical was one of the first instances that a Broadway show highlighted the issues of AIDS and homosexuality so predominantly on stage. The younger generation was enthralled by this story, and felt that it was a

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<sup>34</sup> Kantor, Michael. *The American Musical Oklahoma. Episode Four: "Oh, What a Beautiful Morning."* Video clip, written by JoAnn Young, interview by Agnes De Mille. (2012, Thirteen New York Public Media, aired on PBS.) YouTube.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.



show that finally spoke to them and their issues. Whether audiences agreed with *Rent*'s story or not, America was flocking to see this production. It opened on Broadway April 29<sup>th</sup>, 1996 and “became the biggest thing to hit the Great White Way since Phantom of the Opera.”<sup>36</sup>

The story of *Rent* was originally found in Puccini's opera, *La Boheme*, but Larson adapted it to proclaim his own story and life. Whereas in *La Boheme* the issues had been class systems, tuberculosis, and consumption, *Rent* used similar characters but set them in the lower eastside of New York City and used themes of drug abuse, homosexuality, and most significantly, AIDS.<sup>37</sup> Tragically, Larson died of an aortic aneurism after the final dress rehearsal of his soon to be great hit at age thirty-six. His untimely death helped to spur on the success of the show, and soon a new generation of musical theater fans was born.<sup>38</sup>

In so many ways this musical took old traditions and created new innovations that connected to the culture. The new group of musical theater fans referred to themselves as “rent-heads, some seeing more than 100 performances of the show helping *Rent* run for more then twelve years, becoming the ninth longest running Broadway show.”<sup>39</sup> It was a hit because again it mirrored, challenged, and spoke to the young and old audiences of America. Whether everyone agreed with *Rent* or not did not matter – what mattered was that many *knew* about it and had an opinion on it. This is

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<sup>36</sup> Miller, Scott. *Inside Rent*. (February, 2016), para 6.

<http://www.newlinetheatre.com/rentchapter.html>

<sup>37</sup> Hurwitz, Nathan. *A History of the American Musical Theatre: No Business Like It*. (New York: Taylor and Francis Group, LCC, 2014), 221.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

the significant factor: that it was known in many circles, and thus impacted American society, for good or for bad.

### Musical Theater's Audience

These shows are significant to study and consider because they are all vivid examples of musical theater impacting American culture or the world of musical theater as it is now known. They tried different techniques, told risk-taking stories, and discovered how powerful musical theater could be. However, some of these shows contained content that was not suitable for all audiences. As the history of musical theater progresses the content has continued to decrease in morality. As one observes the musical theater scene in our current day and age, the themes of sex, drugs, lust, profanity, and much more are everywhere, present throughout many productions, and they are so often the focus of the show. This alienates the younger generations, at least elementary and below, from being able to enjoy the theater. Though it is not advantageous to argue that every show be appropriate for every audience age, there is something remarkable to be said about theater that can reach a whole family – generations young and old.

In an interview with Jenny Stafford, a current musical theater writer in New York City, she states: “I find that most stories (even those reaching to explore difficult subject matter) can almost always do it without tasteless, R-rated material. I also believe that there is great value in pieces that exist simply to bring joy, and bring

theatre to families, children, and broad audiences.”<sup>40</sup> There is indeed something to be said about a work of art that can reach audiences of all different ages and at all different stages of life.

This is why it is so important for Christians to desire to have a respected voice in the dialogue: this voice could impact what will appear for years to come on the Broadway stages. Christians “bear a responsibility to their audiences. Theatre cannot exist without audiences, and we should respect our audiences.”<sup>41</sup> Theater can be skillfully done, challenge the culture, and move an audience without the constant use of unnecessarily adult themes. Furthermore, to speak in a way that reaches more audiences will capture the younger generation and create a love for musical theater early on. Those in this industry know that we need an audience in order to have an art form at all. The younger we can make a person fall in love with the theater the longer theater can have an audience around to make it thrive.

#### Current Voice in the Dialogue

Associate Professor of Theatre Sanne McCarthy is resident director of Colorado Christian University stage productions with more than eighteen years teaching at the university level. She has performed in a variety of theater since the age of six, and she has also worked on the writing process of several plays herself. Since she is a current Christian theater artist seeking to have a respected voice in the dialogue her words are relevant to the topic of Christians’ impact in the musical theater world.

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<sup>40</sup> Jenny Stafford (Graduate of NYU and current Musical Theater writer) written interview with author, April 2016.

<sup>41</sup> Johnson, Todd E. & Dale Savidge. *Performing the Sacred: Theology and Theatre in Dialogue*. (Michigan, Baker Academic Publishing Group: 2009.), 103.

For McCarthy, storytelling has always been something of fascination. Since theater was such a large part of her life, when she came to faith in Christ she was truly troubled to not find actual scriptural references about the field of theater in the Bible. There are plenty of references to music, to those who work the land, to leadership and kingship, even motherhood, but not to theater. McCarthy stated that after much consideration on this topic she finally realized that “storytelling is theater. God instituted storytelling at the very beginning, and it was His chosen method of communication with people.”<sup>42</sup> McCarthy goes on to state that: “It is the process of exchanging stories that weave us all together.”<sup>43</sup> If storytelling is such a vital role in human nature, an effective contemporary form of it – theater and musical theater – should not be taken lightly.

The next most significant piece of the interview with McCarthy was her personal examples of how theater could impact an audience. In her time directing at a Christian liberal arts institute she has seen an important fact come to light: “there is a way in which we (her students and her faculty) effect the material we do.”<sup>44</sup> This concept expands on the idea that a director, producer, or even stage manager have a clear effect on the vision cast for a show. McCarthy spoke about how many Christians question how she can direct a show such as *Quilters* at a Christian university – a show dealing with abortion, death, feminism, and the vividly harsh pioneer woman life. McCarthy argues that with a production vision based firmly on a Christian worldview

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<sup>42</sup> Sanne McCarthy (Associate Professor of Theatre at CCU) in discussion with author, April 2016.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

the action on stage has a different message than what it could have coming from a different view of the world. When CCU does *Quilters* they do not change anything in the script, it is exactly the same show, but it is through the director's vision, and worldview, that there is a change of heart.<sup>45</sup> The production is not a dark and depressing story when done by a director who believes that there is life eternal waiting after death. Rather, this story becomes a beautiful picture of legacies left, the bounds of community, and hope in what is yet to come.

This is why it is imperative that Christian theater artists realize they cannot affect this field by merely being Broadway stars, actors, dancers, or singers. It is the leadership in the theatrical production team that makes the show carry a vision, a purpose, and, always, a certain worldview. As previously stated, every individual has a worldview – lenses through which they see life around them – and those lenses affect everything they do, choose, say, or, in our case, showcase on stage. When asked about which are the most impactful jobs in the musical theater world, McCarthy stated: “The producer and director will cast the vision for the whole show.”<sup>46</sup> Yes, the actors, stagehands, dancers, and musicians can certainly live out their biblical mandate to love others as themselves and make an impact on the other theatrical lives they are around. In the end though, those who cast the vision for that particular production will determine the story that the *audience* comes away seeing, or rather, the message they are meant to consider and questions they are meant to answer.

#### The Christian Mandate

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Sanne McCarthy (Associate Professor of Theatre at CCU) in discussion with author, April 2016.

In the book *Music Through the Eyes of Faith* by Harold Best, the need for Christian artists to make art that is always “carefully and lovingly made”<sup>47</sup> is emphasized and discussed. The author uses the example of a rose in God’s creation. Though its beauty last for a short time, it takes months for it to grow into that potential. God, in his creation, did not make things less carefully because they would only last briefly; rather, he put immense care, skill, and creativity into each aspect of his creation.<sup>48</sup>

In general theater is often seen in our society as a frivolous and fleeting endeavor. A Christian may beg the question: are there not better ways to spend our time and energy then feeding into a craft centered on performance? “Theatre is more than amusement, more then a diversion from work. *Theatre is a way for us to incarnate our stories*, to live with one another in community, and to experience the presence of our fellows and of God. Theatre is a powerful medium.”<sup>49</sup> The reality that theater preserves stories almost in bodily form is a phenomenon of genuine importance. Though some shows may be flops and only last in our memories a short time, others will succeed. They could very well become the next *Oklahoma*, *Phantom of the Opera*, *Rent*, or *The Lion King*. Theater and non-theater folk alike know of these musicals. Our stories may be the next longest-running production on Broadway, standing the test of time for

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<sup>47</sup> Best, Harold M. *Music Through the Eyes of Faith*. (United States: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993.), Chapter One.

<sup>48</sup> Best, Harold M. *Music Through the Eyes of Faith*. (United States: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993.), Chapter One.

<sup>49</sup> Johnson, Todd E. & Dale Savidge. *Performing the Sacred: Theology and Theatre in Dialogue*. (Michigan, Baker Academic Publishing Group: 2009.), 50.

decades and reaching thousands of audiences. These facts should be cause for Christian pursuit and influence in the Broadway world.

The artist's goal is to create a work that has a lasting impact. When this is accomplished, the artist and those around her realizes the incredible opportunity she has to reach this culture. "Playwrights need to ask themselves: 'What hasn't been said that only I can say, or that I *must* say?'" Only the deep desire to speak through drama... should motivate writers."<sup>50</sup> The stories Christians have to share are vastly different than the twenty-first century stories being produced. Though some may argue that the Christian worldview will never be accepted on the Broadway stage, there is something powerful and *distinct* about our message. In fact, some shows are stumbling into this worldview without perhaps even meaning too. Two examples currently showing on Broadway are, *Finding Neverland* and *Les Miserables*. Both of these are beautiful, powerful, and redemptive stories that proclaim, in many ways, a Christian worldview.

A Christian musical theater artist has the ability to tell many more powerful stories: pain and suffering can have a purpose, love can be more than a feeling, and each person can be known intimately by the almighty Savior, who gave His only Son to die for *us*. These facts make our story worth telling and worth listening to because they echo what American culture is so desperately searching for. As Dale Savidge states: "Christian writers are in fact liberated by their faith, because Christianity frees us to explore the world as God's handiwork and the place of God's continual presence."<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 105.

<sup>51</sup> Johnson, Todd E. & Dale Savidge. *Performing the Sacred: Theology and Theatre in Dialogue*. (Michigan, Baker Academic Publishing Group: 2009.), 105.

The industry of musical theater would be impacted immensely if Christian artists accepted their biblical mandate to do art with excellence, skill, and craftsmanship. This element of Christians' influence in the world of Broadway and theater has not always succeeded. Too often liberal artists look at Christians in their field as poorly educated, lacking in depth skill, and frankly, not real artists. Several endeavors that Christians make in the field of theater or media end up being mundane and predictable. The blatantly Christian stories that are told on church stages and elsewhere tend to be predictable, and lacking in depth or imagination. Thus, such productions are dismissed and seen as mediocre. When this happens, the stories we share are not heard, but are ridiculed and pushed aside. Furthermore, producing art that is ill-made or poorly executed makes other professional artists put a label of mediocrity on all Christians in this field. How are we to have a voice in the dialogue amongst the liberal musical theater artists if we are not respected in the field itself? The Christian artist should desire to carefully cultivate and produce art. This will allow them to be taken seriously in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Broadway world. Musical theater writer Jenny Stafford had pivotal thoughts to share with Christian musical theatre artists:

I think what needs to change is the reputation of the "Christian Artist." I would challenge Christian artists that whatever your artistic specialty is (acting, directing, writing), you must be as good, or better, than any professional working in theatre. You must show up earlier. You must work harder. You must be more prepared. You must be kinder and better to work with... Christian art, and Christian artists, have a reputation for being "bad"--untalented, unprepared, judgmental or hypocritical to work with; satisfied with mediocrity. And I'm sure that enough of us have seen a terrible church play to see where this comes from... We must be the kind of artists that other artists respect, regardless of our religious beliefs. Our "voice" must be a voice that people are dying to hear because we've



earned their respect...not a voice that must shout over a din of mediocrity.<sup>52</sup>

To make a difference in this scene we must first have a voice that is worth listening to. If we engage in the musical theater community the way Christ has called us to act towards the world, others will notice us. Stafford went on in the interview to discuss accounts of her own Christian friends who are currently starring in Broadway shows and the impact they have had on other acquaintances they have encountered. Most significantly is an actor friend telling Stafford about his experience on Broadway in *Cinderella* with Laura Osnes, a Tony-nominated leading lady, and a wonderful friend of Stafford who attends church with her.<sup>53</sup> This actor friend told her that during tech week, though Osnes was starring in *Cinderella* and had more work than many of the other cast members, she took the time to bake cookies for every single person in the theater: tech, cast, orchestra – everyone. That actor saw Osnes’ sacrificial spirit as he knew she must have stayed up late into the night baking all of those cookies. She had millions of dollars riding on her performance, and she did not sacrifice her excellence to do this good deed, she went on to get another Tony nomination for her performance of *Cinderella*. Stafford emphasized that this actor friend was not a Christian, nor did she know if he knew Osnes was. Regardless, he was so moved by her act of love and sacrifice that “he shares this story about her with awe and admiration.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Jenny Stafford (Graduate of NYU and current Musical Theater writer) written interview with author, April 2016.

<sup>53</sup> Jenny Stafford (Graduate of NYU and current Musical Theater writer) written interview with author, April 2016.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

This is one example of a talented Christian artist making a difference in this field. Her impact is not to be taken lightly. However, if people like Osnes were those writing the scripts, directing the cast, and providing funds making it possible for the productions to mount, the field of musical theater, as a whole, would be greatly impacted. This story shows *one* individual moving *one* man behind the scenes, but leaders in this field have the ability to move *thousands* of audience members through the art form itself, through the stories.

God calls his people to work with servant hearts, love, skill, and excellence. “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.”<sup>55</sup> Our art should reflect the glory of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. If the Christian artist will increasingly live out this mandate, they will indeed have a respected voice in whatever field they pursue. We should by the nature of our faith strive to do our personal best in our craft and always be sharpening our skills. Not only should our art be carefully crafted and executed, it should also challenge the ideals of the twenty-first century that ought to be challenged. Nigel Forde states:

What is the artist’s function? Sometimes he is a kind of court jester to the whole of society: he sees truth and he speaks it, however uncomfortable it may be. Sometimes the world screams back at him, and sometimes it sits shamefaced and silent.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Colossians 3:23-24, *New International Version*

<sup>56</sup> Forde, Nigel. *Theatercraft: Creativity and the Art of Drama*. (Wheaton, Illinois: Harold Shaw Publishers: 1990), 3.

The world *will* respond, but we have to have something worthwhile to say. To change this culture through musical theater will take holding leadership positions and putting forth stories told from a biblical worldview – but also, and maybe more significantly, it will take Christian artists committed to being above par in their craft, loving those around them, and connecting to their audience whoever they may be.

McCarthy echoed these statements when asked the question: “what would you change about musical theater or challenge the Christian musical theater artists to consider?”

In our culture at large we subscribe rather heavily to the statement art for arts sake – it appears to have a lofty sentiment but there is no such thing. Art is produced for personal and/or political reasons – it is produced to make a statement or have an impact. Art is never neutral. [Thus the] Christian art community must take their training seriously and also embrace more and more deeply that art is a hammer and it shapes and [through it] we are able to have a shaping influence on our culture.<sup>57</sup>

Musical theater is an excellent arena for Christians to have their voice, and their stories heard. As previously stated, it is important that there are not just Christian actors on Broadways, but also, Christian writers, directors, musicians, composers, choreographers, and costumers. It is not the actor who decides the content, material, or overarching vision for a show. If Christians are to make an impact in this field they must be *leaders* in whatever area they choose to embark into.

To expand, I myself have wrestled with this dilemma time and time again. When I consider auditioning for a show I do research on the production. However,

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<sup>57</sup> Sanne McCarthy (Associate Professor of Theatre at CCU) in discussion with author, April 2016.

unless I know the director of the show I have a hard time choosing to audition because I know that so often a play's original vision is altered by the director's vision. It is amazing how much impact the director has on a show. For example, in the musical *Annie Get Your Gun*, a director can choose to intensify all the sexual innuendos found in that script in order to make the story a much more adult experience, or in *Romeo and Juliet* a director can decide to have intense intimacy on the stage and quickly make the classic tragedy a raunchy spectacle. These elements are common occurrences in our culture, media, and lives so it is no wonder that they are common on the Broadway stage. However, when considering the facts that have been presented about musical theater's impact and role in American society – is this not exactly the acceptable place for questions to be raised, worldviews to be challenged, and for our culture to see something new happening?

### Summary

Storytelling has been a pivotal element of human culture since the beginning of time. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”<sup>58</sup> The first accounts of Scripture speak to the fact that God's nature is creative, and we who are made in His image are also artistic beings. Furthermore, the story of creation, and the Bible as a whole, is one of the most remarkable stories ever written. God spoke those stories into existence. He Himself chose to communicate to His creation through story, knowing that He embedded our nature with the ability to connect through such a medium. Then, observing Jesus's time on earth it is clear that he understood this same principle as He centered many of his teachings on parables – stories. Looking at the ancient Greek and

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<sup>58</sup> Genesis 1:1, *New International Version*.

Roman cultures we are able to see theater's impact on society at large, and how the theater in those days greatly influenced what we now have come to define it as. The theatrical events were so large and so important that they lasted all throughout the day and everyone came out to see them. Theater was not something for the elite or for a specific group of people – it was for all ages, all backgrounds, and all class levels.

Considering these elements one can see that America has been greatly influenced by its own contemporary version of such storytelling: musical theater. This art form has been used to challenge government (such as in *Cradle Will Rock*), bring theater, music, and dance together to tell a bigger story (such as in *Show Boat* and *Oklahoma*), and reach the old with the new (such as in *Rent*). Musical theater at large continues to be a phenomenon in the American culture, however it is quickly becoming an experience that the whole family cannot, without worry, enjoy. Though there are certainly times when it is appropriate for a theatrical production to have adult content, it is not good or necessary to make it a staple in the field. As an art form of such importance and impact, it is imperative that stories from a Christian worldview soon receive more spotlight on the Broadway stages.

### Conclusion

Christian artists have a unique opportunity to shape musical theater in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This will require more than talented Christian actors and actresses on the Broadway stage. If Christians seek to take leadership roles in this field, like Professor Sanne McCarthy, they will have the ability to impact the Broadway climate and challenge the culture through stories. Furthermore, Christians will have a respected voice in this industry if they commit to excellence in these roles and work harder than

most. We have a message that this world needs to hear. Though Bible plays have their time and place, stories that truly impact our 21<sup>st</sup> century culture will be more personal and more imaginative. The stories American culture needs to hear are our personal testimonies, or rather, our *stories*. Consider this: we all play a role in the greatest story ever written – God’s story – and we are called to go out and tell the world His good news. Storytelling matters, and musical theater is a powerful means of storytelling that the Christian artist can use to reach and impact the 21<sup>st</sup> century American culture.

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