

Extended Essay in Theatre

How do golden age and contemporary performances of Gershwin scores reflect changing American views of love?

An exploration in the changing role of love in American musical theatre.

Word Count: 3,975

Pages: 18

Table of Contents:

Introduction	1
Jazz Influences	1
American Musical Comedy	2
Methodology	3
Song Analysis	4
“Someone to Watch Over Me”	4
<i>Oh, Kay!</i> (1926)	4
<i>Crazy For You</i> (1992)	6
<i>Oh, Kay!</i> and <i>Crazy for You</i> : In Comparison	7
“Who Cares”	9
<i>Of Thee I Sing</i> (1952)	9
<i>An American in Paris</i> (2015)	11
<i>Of Thee I Sing</i> & <i>An American in Paris</i> : In Comparison	12
Conclusion	13
Works Cited	16

INTRODUCTION

Brothers George and Ira Gershwin are renowned for their “words and music that transcend time” (“The Gershwin Brothers”) which they composed throughout the 1920s and beyond. The brothers were born into a Russian-Jewish family living in Brooklyn in the end of the 19th Century. George, the composer of the pair, began studying piano at ten years old, and at 15 took up writing and composing. With roots in ragtime and jazz, his work was diverse and unlike other classical composers at the time. Ira, the elder, began giving George lyrical help shortly after dropping out of college. Thus, their famous partnership began. Beginning in 1924 with *Lady, Be Good!*, they worked exclusively with each other and produced more than two dozen Broadway and Hollywood scores until 1937, when George died.

JAZZ INFLUENCES

George Gershwin was praised for his ability to reflect the duality of humanity in his music, which stemmed from his jazz background. He was able to appeal to low and high classes, blacks and whites, and old and young audiences. He utilized chromatic harmonies and complex inner voices within his compositions to demonstrate this duality and complexity. Meanwhile, Ira’s lyrics combined formality and cliches to “defamiliarize modes of discourse” (Savran, 475). Together, they created music that would sustain generations and societal shifts. The complex nature of their work made the transition into theatre easy, as the necessary storytelling aspect was already present.

The Gershwins’ scores were heavily influenced by jazz, a genre that George helped to pioneer in the early 20th century. Jazz arose in the 1920s as a combination of

classical and vaudeville styles of music. The Gershwins' encouraged the melding of the worlds of jazz and musical theatre with their work. Throughout the 1920s, jazz and theatre lived side-by-side as two thriving industries. Vaudeville and musical comedy were the most popular forms of entertainment, and eventually the two started to melt into jazz, as the music became heavily featured in musical underscoring. As it became more involved in theatre, sometimes appearing in serious plays, jazz was seen as an "emblem of a new and dangerous" age (460). On the musical side, jazz itself became theatrical. Performed in lively dance halls and cabaret style concerts, it became a "kind of theatre" (461). Musical theatre was intriguing as "its glittering, seductive, and often tawdry entertainments, became a metonym for and emblem of jazz" (462). This feeling amplified with the end of World War I. The American people needed an escape, and jazz and theatre provided one.

THE AMERICAN MUSICAL COMEDY

The traditional American musical comedy arose in the early 1900s as a combination of burlesque, revue, and operetta. Through a mixture of these three established genres, musical comedies used themes of love and comedy to create characters that viewers saw themselves reflected in. Audiences were captured by storytelling where the "lyrics and the music had a light and jaunty air about them uniquely American" (Ewen). The United States was at a turning point in history where the economic and political state of the nation was improving and an era of hope emerged with the new century. Entertainment was expanding and that which highlighted the American experience gained popularity. Throughout the 20th century this form of

theatre thrived, composing most of what is regarded as “golden age” musical theatre—musicals performed and written pre-1970s. At the end of the millennium, however, these performances faded and pop/rock style musicals gained popularity. Yet, at the turn of the century, musical comedies were, surprisingly, revived. This movement was kickstarted by the growth of “new Gershwin musical comedies”¹ that premiered throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, starting with *Crazy for You* in 1992. This cultural revival allowed modern theatre professionals to adopt the charming scores of the Gershwins' and the essence of the golden age to entertain contemporary audiences.

Today, the Gershwins' music continues to embody the jazz age of America and musical theatre. Their music transcends generations and manages to maintain relevancy in both disciplines. But, musical theatre and American society have changed greatly from the 1920s. Luckily, the Gershwins' music allows for flexibility in storytelling, giving way for contemporary changes. The same songs that were performed in the 1920s are sung today with alterations that follow the cultural shifts of society. They modify the plots to provide a medium for modern love stories and jokes to be told. However, both golden age and contemporary theatre use the Gershwins' music to illustrate societal and cultural shifts in the American views of love.

METHODOLOGY

In this essay, I will compare and contrast golden age and contemporary performances of Gershwin scores in theatre and their relationship to the changing nature of the American musical comedy. To do so, I have selected two popular songs used in Gershwin shows. I will compare and contrast two versions of each, one from the

¹ The phrase used in advertisements for *Crazy for You* (1992).

1920s-1960s and one from the 1990s-2010s. Through this examination of the Gershwins' music I hope to provide insight into the changing role of love as shown in American musical comedies, and how the Gershwins' music has influenced such shifts.

For each song and show I will provide context on the placement of the song within the full show and analysis of the effects of stylistic choices within the music. Additionally, I will examine the show's reception using *New York Times* theatre reviews. Then, I will consider the similarities and differences between the two editions, looking for patterns and shifts that signal major changes in American society's perception of love and, hence, changes in the American musical comedy.

SONG ANALYSIS

“Someone to Watch Over Me”

First, I'll look at “Someone to Watch Over Me,” as performed in *Oh, Kay!* (1926) and *Crazy For You* (1992) by Barbara Ruick and Ruthie Henshall, respectively. One of the Gershwins' most famous works, the piece describes a woman's affection for her lover, who she longs for, wishing she had “someone to watch over [her]” (Gershwin).

Oh, Kay! (1926)

Oh, Kay! follows the Duke of Durham and Lady Kay, siblings living in the prohibition era as bootleggers. Kay, to her surprise, falls for a man who is engaged to someone else. After attempting to persuade her lover to marry her instead of his fiancé, she longingly sings “Someone to Watch Over Me” to her toy rag doll.

As a whole, the song emotes a sense of tender longing. At this point in the story, Lady Kay is upset and lost because she loves a man she can't be with. Her yearning is evident in Barbara Ruick's vocalization of the material. Throughout, she maintains a strong vibrato, producing a rounded and airy sound. She also sings in her head voice, allowing for a soft, feminine tone. Most golden age theatre is sung and written in a soprano key, easily giving way for the romanticism that is common for female characters in this era of musical theatre. Ruick's use of such voice stylings give way for the amorous sense of longing that is present.

Additionally, the tempo of the piece is slow and steady. The piano, winds, and strings swell periodically, creating a romantic sound beneath her. Listeners cannot help but sway along to the sweet melody and sympathize with Lady Kay and her conundrum of love.

The influence of jazz is easily recognizable in *Oh, Kay!* The stylings of the piano parts alone show the effects in their rhythm, tone, and feel. Additionally, in contemporary musical theatre, acting and lyrical analysis are emphasized, unlike golden age theatre. While Ruick's emotional variety is evident, the performance of the lyrics and melody are repetitive. She gives into the rhythm of the song, allowing the listener to immerse themselves in the music and tone, rather than specific lyrics. The song then becomes more about the overall feeling and emotion rather than each individual lyric's. This style is more commonly seen in golden age theatre because of its close connections to jazz. Today, meanwhile, the relationship between jazz and theatre is a bit more distant, making musical theatre styles more diverse and contemporary.

In 1926, *Oh, Kay!* was highly praised as an “intensely delightful” (Atkinson, “The Play”) musical comedy. The show was applauded for its “excellent blending of all the creative arts of musical entertainment,” and is representative of the beginnings of American infatuation with musical comedies. *Oh, Kay!* arrived on Broadway at the beginning of the era of golden age theatre and is still recognized as a “smash hit musical” (Gershwin Blog Team), accrediting its success to the romantic vulnerability of “Someone to Watch Over Me.” The show was adored by audiences and critics in the 1920s and remains so in modern productions. It combined aspects of comedy and romance to create a classic 1920s musical, whose effect on audiences would withstand decades of growth in American musical theatre and culture.

Crazy for You (1992)

Inspired by *Girl Crazy*, a 1930s Gershwin hit, *Crazy for You* follows city banker Bobby on his journey to foreclose an old theatre in Nevada where he meets Polly, a local girl who captures his attention. In an attempt to seduce Polly, he promises to save the theater, which belongs to her father, without revealing his original intentions of foreclosure. However, Bobby’s identity is eventually revealed. Polly sings “Someone to Watch Over Me” as a requiem for her loneliness and hurt feelings after Bobby’s deception.

The 1992 version of “Someone to Watch Over Me” is diverse in terms of tone, style, and vocals. This arrangement is full of simple underscoring, putting focus on storytelling rather than musical spectacle. In the chorus, the orchestral swells represent the wide range of emotion that Polly feels. She is hurt by the betrayal of a friend, and is

considering what her feelings for him—and love as a whole—are. The orchestra sometimes plays an opposing melody beneath her vocals, capturing Polly's internal dialogue and conflict as she is contemplating her feelings for Bobby.

In 1992, *Crazy for You* was commended as “a riotously entertaining show[...that] uncorked the American musical's classic blend of music, laughter, dancing, sentiment and showmanship with a freshness and confidence rarely seen during the “Cats” decade.” (Rich). *Crazy for You* signified a “celebratory expression of a long-awaited shift in Broadway's fortunes” and had the unrivaled ability to make “everything old seem young again.” It brought “freshness” to the end of the era of 80s rock operas such as *Cats* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*. This review is illustrative of the major impact the reintroduction of the Gershwins' music had on theatre. At the time of *Crazy for You*, golden age comedies were overshadowed by contemporary styles. While shows from the 1920s-1960s were occasionally revived, this first “new Gershwin musical comedy” signaled a change in the role of golden age theatre in modern society by taking “some of the greatest songs ever written for Broadway and Hollywood and reawaken[ing] the impulse that first inspired them.” *Crazy for You*'s new take on the musical comedy gave way for a new realm of plots and characters, especially female characters.

Oh, Kay! and *Crazy for You*: In Comparison

Many stylistic differences are present in the two versions of “Someone to Watch Over Me.” Overall, Ruthie Henshall's 1992 version has a quicker tempo and fuller orchestrations than the 1926 variation. Specifically, during the bridge, Henshall only takes breaths as intentional punctuation. This technique increases the tempo of those

few bars, giving the lyrics less romantic longing and more desperation. In the 1926 version, Ruick takes rhythmic breath as phrasing, which, at times, loses the audience's connection to the words. Additionally, Ruick's soprano voice is consistently soft and romantic. Henshall, however, uses more of her lower register to express emotion vocally. This is especially noticeable during poignant emotional sections. Henshall's vocal variety as well as the crescendo of the orchestra create the back and forth that is symbolic of the character's internal debate on her feelings of loneliness. While the contemplation, tenderness, longing, and vulnerability is present in Ruick's version, the contrast and personal conflict are not as evident, based on the tonality and stylings of the arrangement. These changes show a major shift in the storytelling aspect of a musical comedy. Both of these women are struggling with love. However, in the 1920s, women's roles in theatre were not as widely explored as they are today. With the increase of women's rights and recognition, female roles in modern theatre—as well as film and other entertainment media—have been given more depth in addition to more diverse and, ultimately, human, character arcs.

While the two songs vary in a multitude of ways, they also have several similarities. Firstly, both songs grow in intensity. In *Oh, Kay!* the underscoring becomes more complex as the song and emotion intensify. Meanwhile in *Crazy for You*, the emotional quality expands as the orchestrations open up. Furthermore, both women are expressing a deep longing for someone. The Gershwins' writing has allowed for this romantic emotion to transcend time as women in theatre have evolved. Lady Kay is the ingenue who longs for a man she loves. On the other hand, Polly is also an ingenue, but she is strong and sure of herself. Yet, in this song we see her vulnerability. This

difference is key in exemplifying the change of women's role in musical comedies over time. Before, women's character arcs were simplified to love and comedy. Today, female characters employ a wider range of human emotion, reflecting the humanity of modern women. In these two shows, the role of the woman shifts from one where she wistfully sings about a man she loves to one where she explores the complexities of love. The Gershwins' music allows the adaptation of women in the musical comedy, and welcomes it, enabling their music to maintain relevancy in a changing society.

“Who Cares”

Secondly, “Who Cares” as performed in *Of Thee I Sing* (1952)² and *An American in Paris* (2015), is oft performed as a duet between two lovers expressing their affection for each other by singing, “who cares what the public chatters, love's the only thing that matters” (Gershwin).

Of Thee I Sing (1952)

The story tracks politician John P. Wintergreen on his campaign trail to US presidency and eventual impeachment. The show is the second installment of a trio of political satires written by the Gershwin brothers in the early 20th century. Along Wintergreen's campaign trail, he doesn't have a wife, which could help boost his campaign. So, he hosts a beauty pageant, claiming he will marry the winner. However, he ends up falling in love with his secretary, Mary. After he takes office, the winner of the beauty pageant, Diana Devereaux—fueled by her anger after not winning the promised prize—publicly sues the president. In an effort to calm the rumors of the issue,

² While *Of Thee I Sing* originally debuted on the stage in 1931, the most accessible version of the cast recording is from the 1952 revival, which is used in this analysis.

Wintergreen holds a press conference in which he tells the public that the only thing that matters is his love for Mary, where together they sing “Who Cares.”

The song is overall very fast paced, capturing the chatter-like nature of the political conversation. Halfway through, Mary joins Wintergreen to sing the romantic chorus. When she enters, the strings soften, and her soprano voice lightens the political tone of the song and embraces the love story at hand. Contrastingly, during Wintergreen’s solo sections, his voice is harsh, pronounced, and quick, making the lyrics sound as if they were a passionate speech. The overall tempo and style encapsulate the 1950s American political energy. It flows between comedic politics and romance freely, balancing out the contrast of the two and allowing the traditional comedy to shine. This song is emblematic of the classic love story of the 1950s. Simply, a man and woman are in love and nothing can come between them.

In 1952, *Of Thee I Sing* was reviewed as a “fabulous theatre cartoon” (Atkinson, “Of Thee I Sing”)³. With fresh political context, it thrived by “following a hallowed American tradition” of “[lampooning] national government.” This is evidence of the Gershwins’ “smart, ironically sentimental, warm and incentive” music adapting to societal shifts early on. While there were flaws in the book, the show was still “pretty funny stuff—gaudy, vulgar and prodigal with its fooling.” This review also demonstrates the powerful rise of musical comedies in the mid-20th century and the consequential competition. Even though *Of Thee I Sing* was adored by theatergoers, it was still not critically perfect. Other musical comedies on Broadway in 1952 were better, funnier, and, ultimately, more entertaining. The 1950s and 1960s mark the height of the

³ This review discusses the 1952 revival of the show rather than the original 1931 production.

American golden age musical comedy's popularity and the revival of *Of Thee I Sing* was easily subject to the competition that arose.

An American In Paris (2015)

An American In Paris, originally a movie, starring Gene Kelly in 1951, was reimagined for the stage in 2015. The story is supported by dance and classical ballet, unlike many modern musicals. It follows a young American G.I, Jerry, on his quest to becoming a painter in Paris at the end of World War II. Along the way he meets a young dancer, Lise, who becomes his muse. She, however, is engaged to a friend of Jerry's, Henri. Jerry also meets Milo, a rich American woman looking to invest in the arts in France, who quickly falls for him. After a party where Jerry confesses his love to Lise, to which she cannot respond, Milo and Jerry and Henri and Lise debrief the evening in parallel conversations. When Jerry asks if Milo cares about what people think about her, she responds via song, thus beginning "Who Cares." Throughout the song Henri echoes her sentiments, singing them to Lise. While Milo convinces herself to be strong after she finds out the man she loves does not return her feelings, Henri struggles to keep the woman he is supposed to marry.

Beneath the first few lyrics, the orchestrations are simple and soft, similar to the lyrics. As the chorus begins, Henri begins to echo Milo's words. The two voices come in and out of unity throughout the song. Sometimes they share a sentiment and sometimes Henri emphasizes Milo's thoughts. This arrangement blends the two stories together, showing audiences the complexity of the relationships at hand. The underscoring remains constant in pace, tone, and style throughout, though it sometimes

intensifies in the sheer amount of musicians playing. However, as the end approaches, some instruments back out, allowing the song to return to its original simplicity. The characters subtly slow the tempo as they sing the final lyrics. As they soften, the underscoring follows and settles beneath them. “Who Cares” follows directly into another song in the show, but the slight pause between the two, along with the slowed tempo, invites a tone of questioning. In this scene, several characters are coming to terms with the awkwardness and complexities of their relationships, and are looking for something to grasp onto in terms of love. When the orchestra holds out the final note and the actors back away from their words, listeners can feel the sense of doubt and desperation that is present in a song that is typically regarded as a tender duet. A love story is no longer black and white and about true love. Here, several people are suffering and questioning what love means to them.

An American in Paris was described by reviewers as a “plain gorgeous[...]traditional Broadway musical” (Isherwood). The Gershwins’ score “provide[d] the whirring engine that [drove] all the exuberant motion onstage.” In addition, the show paid “loving tribute[...]to cherished notions about romance that have been a defining element of the American musical theater practically since its inception,” exemplifying the significance of textual shifts made to highlight modern views of the relationships that have been a staple in musical theatre throughout history.

Of Thee I Sing & An American in Paris: In Comparison

The two versions of “Who Cares” are vastly different. The 1952 edition is conversational and political, while the 2015 version is still conversational, but

contemplative and reflective. The main disparity is in the context, which informs performance. In *Of Thee I Sing*, the song reflects a story of true love succeeding, while in *An American In Paris*, the song covers a story of true love that cannot be. The latter represents the modernity of the piece. Relationships are no longer simple. *An American In Paris* shows a multi-faceted love story that has difficulty coming to fruition. During “Who Cares” we see four individuals struggling to come to terms with what love is. To amplify this contemporary take, it is not only the women who express vulnerability in their relationships, it is the men as well. Jerry is sought after by two women, but he cannot be with the one he loves deeply. Meanwhile, Henri is dealing internally with his sexual identity and status, feigning his feelings as love. Whereas in *Of Thee I Sing*, Wintergreen and Mary are perfectly happy after discovering their true love. Similar to other golden age musicals, nothing can come between them. This contrast is representative of the shift in how a love story is approached within a musical comedy. The Gershwins' music provides an outlet for both of these stories and understandings of relationships.

CONCLUSION

Even though the two versions of each song have the same lyrics and music, context, orchestrations, and performance influence the storytelling of the Gershwins' most popular music. These minor and major changes allow scores from the past to remain relevant and powerful in contemporary theatre. The adaptations allow George and Ira Gershwin's music to remain a powerful tool in the performance of the American musical comedy. The four shows examined above all have one major resemblance:

popularity. Spanning several eras of musical theatre, Gershwin shows are consistently adored by the public as both original and revival material. This is exemplary of the impact and timelessness of the Gershwin melodies that have shaped music, both theatrical and classical.

Their music has the ability to transcend time because it can support characters and relationships of all types, in both golden age and contemporary theatre. For women in the musical comedy, extensive background and character development was uncommon in early forms of theatre. But today, female actors can indulge in the wide range of human emotion that is available to them. Both types of female characters are able to use the Gershwins' music to fuel and underscore their stories. Similarly, American society's perception of love, as shown in theatre, evolves under Gershwin scores.

In the era of golden age theatre, a love story was essential in a musical comedy. Love embodied perfection and happiness. It was truthful and pure. Today, while still equally essential, love in musical comedies has grown to be more complex. The convoluted nature of the Gershwins' music made this shift easy. Love evolved from something simple and truthful to something still truthful, yet complicated and messy. We can see this in the theatrical depiction of women—how they've become strong and grounded versus driven by love—as well as the representation of relationships—how they've become elaborate and vulnerable versus simplistic.

While classic American musical comedies remain prominent in society today, their themes and storytellings have, rightfully, changed with the times. Both golden age and contemporary performances of Gershwin music reflect these shifts with their

malleable and intricate nature, thus paving the way for new forms of storytelling as modern theatre and society change.

WORKS CITED

“An American in Paris (musical).” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, 2020, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/An_American_in_Paris_\(musical\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/An_American_in_Paris_(musical)).

Andrews, John et.al “Musicals: The Definitive Illustrative Story.” Dorling Kindersley 2015.

Atkinson, Brooks. “‘Of Thee I Sing’: Another Production From the Past Is Better Than Most of the New Ones.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, May 11, 1952. Accessed via *NYT Archives*.

Atkinson, Brooks. “The Play: Bootlegging Bedlam.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, November 9, 1926. Accessed via *NYT Archives*.

Block, Geoffrey. “Enchanted Evenings: The Broadway Musical from Show Boat to Sondheim.” New York, Oxford University Press, 1997.

“Crazy for You (musical).” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, 2020, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crazy_for_You_\(musical\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crazy_for_You_(musical)).

Ewen, David. “Musical Comedy is Born.” *The Story of America’s Musical Theater*, *theatrehistory.com*, Chilton Company, 1961. Accessed via www.theatrehistory.com/american/cohan001.html.

“George Gershwin.” *Masterworks Broadway*. Sony Music Entertainment, 2020. www.masterworksbroadway.com/artist/george-gershwin/.

Gershwin Blog Team. “Raggedy Ann: The Star of ‘Someone to Watch Over Me.’” *The Gershwin Initiative*, University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre, and Dance, 2017, smt.d.umich.edu/ami/gershwin/?p=1299.

“The Gershwin Brothers.” *gershwin.com*. Gershwin Enterprises, 2020. gershwin.com/the-gershwin-brothers/.

Gershwin, George et. al. “Someone to Watch Over Me.” *Crazy For You (Original London Cast Recording)*. BMG Music, 1993. *Spotify*, open.spotify.com/track/11INgPYIfDfgfJTAYOapXA?si=uzMx2nhFR_yUWr6SR4QXig.

Gershwin, George et. al. "Someone to Watch Over Me." *Oh, Kay!*, Sony BMG Music Entertainment, 1926. *Spotify*, open.spotify.com/track/6f9LYAOD74464g0MPJuVSx?si=LSH5nrPWQVO38rhfKdzKxA

Gershwin, George et. al. "Who Cares?/For You, For Me, For Evermore." *An American In Paris (Original Broadway Cast Recording)*, Sony Music Entertainment, 2015. *Spotify*, open.spotify.com/track/0WKsmihh0ntLgPo3qJyOaU?si=GqvCREVwTV29wQttYa5J2Q

Gershwin, George et. al. "Who Cares." *Of Thee I Sing*, Capitol Records, 1952. *Spotify*, open.spotify.com/track/1JulEMzvsx8hvj46cye25Y?si=teGmnth8SWCFqy4MEIOXew

Isherwood, Charles. "Review: 'An American in Paris,' a Romance of Song and Step." *The New York Times*, The New York Times. April 12, 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/04/13/theater/review-an-american-in-paris-a-romance-of-song-and-step.html?searchResultPosition=1.

"Of Thee I Sing." *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, 2019, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Of_Thee_I_Sing.

"Oh, Kay!" *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oh,_Kay!.

Rich, Frank. "Review/Theater: Crazy for You: A Fresh Chorus of Gershwin on Broadway." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, February 20, 1992, nytimes.com/1992/02/20/theater/review-theater-crazy-for-you-a-fresh-chorus-of-gershwin-on-broadway.html.

Savran, David. "The Search for America's Soul: Theatre in the Jazz Age." *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 58, No. 3, Hearing Theatre (Oct., 2006), John Hopkins University Press, 2006.

Schiff, David. "Misunderstanding Gershwin." *The Atlantic Monthly*, October, 1998. www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1998/10/misunderstanding-gershwin/377252/

Schneider, Wayne. "The Gershwin Style: New Looks at the Music of George Gershwin."
New York, Oxford University Press, 1999.