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CHRISTIN BONIN

The Broadway Belt

The Musical Diva and Her Belt Voice from Technical,
Ethnic, and Feminist Perspectives

OLMS

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The Musical Diva and Her Belt Voice from Technical, Ethnic, and Feminist Perspectives

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Acknowledgments

“You’ll never walk alone!” sings the cast of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Carousel*, as the invisible Billy Bigelow encourages his daughter Louise and reassures his widow Julie that his love and support will carry on. This song has special significance to me as I think back over the immense undertaking of writing this dissertation. The project has only been possible because of those who have walked beside me and supported me through even the most challenging moments. These people deserve my deepest thanks. Chief among them is Prof. Dr. David Roesner at the Institute of Theatre Science at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University in Munich, Germany. I cannot imagine a more supportive first supervisor. He guided me to look deeper into my subject from different angles without ever pushing me in a direction I did not want to take. Also crucial for the development of my subject was my second supervisor, Prof. David Savran, Ph.D., of the City University of New York. He challenged me to convince him about the importance of the belt voice and the belting Broadway musical diva (he said I succeeded!). In the final months of my writing, PD Dr. Charlotte Lerg from the America Institute of LMU advised me on important points concerning feminism, and Adam Steinberg edited my work with care until the very last phrase.

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Just before she breaks into the impassioned “Rose’s Turn,” the protagonist of *Gypsy* asks the Big Question: “What did I do it for?” I surely can say that I wrote this dissertation with my deepest affection for all musical performers belting their hearts out. It is my mission to help them gain recognition as being among the most crucial pillars of Broadway, and I intend to support them in the fight for equity and diversity in musical theatre, as they raise their voices offstage — and belt out on stage the greatest Broadway songs ever written.

Deutschsprachige Zusammenfassung:

Der Broadway Belt: Die Musicaldiva und ihre Beltstimme aus technischen, ethnischen und feministischen Perspektiven

Ziel meiner Arbeit ist es, das Phänomen „Broadway Belt“ zu untersuchen. Die Bezeichnung „Broadway Belt“ ist als ein Ehrentitel zu verstehen, den Zuschauer, Kritiker, Fans und Experten nur wenigen hochkarätigen Musicaldarstellerinnen zuteilwerden lassen. Diese haben in der Regel mehrere Erfolge in verschiedenen Musicalhauptrollen am Broadway vorzuweisen und ihre nicht-klassische Gesangsstimme gilt im Fachjargon als sogenannte Beltstimme. Meine Fragestellungen konzentrieren sich auf drei Hauptbereiche: die Beltstimme, die künstlerische Persönlichkeit von Broadway Beltern, insbesondere die, die ausdrücklich als „Broadway Belt“ bezeichnet werden, und die Rolle der Rose im Musical *Gypsy* als Fallbeispiel.

Kapitel eins, *Einleitung*, beschäftigt sich zuerst mit meiner Forschungsfrage und dem Stand der Forschung. Hier stelle ich fest, dass bisher unterschiedliche Aspekte voneinander getrennt betrachtet wurden. Die Stimmforschung beschäftigt sich mit den physiologischen Gegebenheiten während ein Belt Ton produziert wird, wohingegen die Stimmpädagogik Mittel und Wege sucht, die Erzeugung des Belt Klanges erklären zu können. Historisch wird vor allem die Entwicklung des Genres und die intermediäre Position des Broadway Musicals zwischen E- und U-Musik untersucht. Ebenso lassen sich Betrachtungen einiger Darstellerinnen und ihrer Rollenprofile finden, jedoch dienen diese entweder einer historischen Einordnung oder haben biographische Züge, die in den Musical-geschichtlichen Zusammenhang gesetzt werden. Mein Ziel ist es, den Broadway Belt in seiner Gesamtheit zu erfassen: Die Stimme und die Entwicklungsgeschichte des Belt Klanges, mögliche Kategorisierungen der Broadway Belter und ihrer erfolgreichsten Rollen, sowie die Betrachtung der künstlerischen Persönlichkeit ausgewählter Broadway Belter und die Wahrnehmung ihres Star- und Diva Status im Zusammenhang mit ihrer Position in der Gesellschaft. Insbesondere Letzteres benötigt besonderen Augenmerk, da durch die

öffentliche Wahrnehmung von Starpersönlichkeiten und deren Kultstatus ihr Verhalten und ihrer Äußerungen in der Öffentlichkeit von gesellschaftlicher Bedeutung sind.

Zur Beantwortung der daraus entstehenden Fragen und Anknüpfungspunkte für weitere Unterpunkte wende ich vorrangig die Methode der Diskursanalyse an. Hier bieten mir Aufführungskritiken, Biographien und Interviews von und mit Broadway Beltern, Komponisten, Autoren und Songwritern sowie bereits vorhandene Fachliteratur zu den Themen Broadway Musical, amerikanische Kulturgeschichte, Gender Forschung und Feminismus Recherchematerial. Zur Ursprungsforschung des Beltens als Gesangsstil im amerikanischen Musiktheater analysiere ich fachbezogene Literatur und setze stilistische Klassenzuordnungen mit den sozialen Verhältnissen der jeweiligen Epoche in Zusammenhang. In der Untersuchung der künstlerischen Persönlichkeiten und ihrer Rollen vergleiche ich Diskurse ausgewählter Broadway Belter und analysiere Zusammenhänge und Unterschiede. Im Folgenden gehe ich nun auf die Inhalte der einzelnen Kapitel ein.

Kapitel 2, *Belting – About Singing Style, Sound and Vocal Technique*, stellt die Beltstimme ins Zentrum meiner Untersuchungen. Ziel ist es hier, den häufig missverstandenen Begriff Belting zu untersuchen und Schlüsse für das Phänomen des Broadway Belts daraus zu ziehen. Zuerst beleuchte ich die Begriffsgeschichte des ursprünglich umgangssprachlichen Terminus “to belt out” und arbeite die Bedeutung des Broadway Musicals und seiner musikalischen Sprache, das Belting, in der Entwicklung einer kollektiven, kulturellen Identität der amerikanischen Nation heraus. Dafür nehme ich Bezug auf die Theorien von Grace Barnes und Raymond Knapp.¹

Anschließend betrachte ich historische Entwicklungen und Vorfälle wie Massenimmigration und den *Astor Place Riot* und stelle den Zusammenhang her, dass dies zwar einerseits zur sozialen Klassentrennung in Theatern führte und zur Aufspaltung der Gesellschaft im Allgemeinen beitrug, daraus jedoch das amerikanische Musiktheater als Mischform und kultureller Ausdruck einer neu entstandenen sozialen

¹ Siehe Barnes, *Her Turn on Stage: The Role of Women in Musical Theatre*. Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006).

Mittelschicht erwuchs. Ich stelle fest, dass im Entstehungsprozess des amerikanischen Musiktheaters die familiäre Sozialisierung kultureller Vorlieben nicht zwangsläufig zu einer klassenspezifischen künstlerischen Tradition führte, wie dies Paul Dimaggio und Michael Useem annehmen,² sondern dass kommerzielles Interesse und das Bedürfnis der Zuschauer nach leichterer musikalischer Unterhaltung überwog. Auf Richard Butsch³ zurückgreifend, betrachte ich die Feminisierung des Theaters im Zuschauerraum wie auf der Bühne und stelle eine Statusänderung der Darstellerinnen von der sich prostituiierenden zur idealisierten Bühnenpersönlichkeit fest, deren Gesangsstil des Beltens sich zum performativen Ausdruck professioneller Darstellerinnen des amerikanischen Musiktheaters entwickelte. Wichtig ist hier die ethnische Aufspaltung der Sängerinnen in weiße, sogenannte “Coon”-Shouter⁴ im Vaudeville Theater und afro-amerikanischer Sängerinnen, die sich als Blues- und Jazz-Sängerinnen dem Schallplattengeschäft zuwandten. Zeitgleich zu der Entwicklung des amerikanischen Musiktheaters zu Beginn der 1920er Jahre zum *Broadway Musical* als eigene Gattung eines vorrangig “weißen” Musiktheaters entstanden auch sogenannten *Black Musicals* mit einer ausschließlich afro-amerikanischen Besetzung. Hier beziehe ich mich auf Larry Stempel,⁵ der deren untergeordnete Existenz als “Präsenz und Nicht-Präsenz gleichermaßen” bezeichnet. Demzufolge hat sich Musical Belting vor allem als eigener Gesangsstil weißer Musicaldarstellerinnen entwickelt und der typische Belt Sound entstand aus einer Mischung ihres “weißen” Gesangsstil mit Imitationen afro-amerikanischer Musikstile.

Als nächstes untersuche ich die Klangproduktion und Klangrezeption dieses Broadway Musical Belt Sounds. Ich analysiere die Soundqualitäten Lautstärke, Tonhöhe und das Timbre der Beltstimme und komme durch die Verknüpfung meiner eigenen Forschungsergebnisse

² Siehe Dimaggio and Michael, “Social Class and Arts Consumption – The Origins and Consequences of Class Differences in Exposure to the Arts in America.”

³ Siehe Richard Butsch, “Bowery B’hoys and Matinee Ladies: The Re-Gendering of Nineteenth-Century American Theater Audiences,” *American Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (1994).

⁴ Der Begriff “coon” hat rassistischen Ursprung, wird jedoch in meiner Dissertation ausschließlich als historischer Terminus der amerikanischen Musikgeschichte verwendet.

⁵ Siehe Stempel, *Showtime – A History of the Broadway Musical Theater*.

mit physikalischen und physiologischen Resultaten aus der Stimmforschung, u.a. von Johan Sundberg⁶ und Thomas J. Millhouse und Frantz Clermont,⁷ zu der Schlussfolgerung, dass Belten ein Gesangsstil ist, der nichts mit Schreien oder Brüllen zu tun hat. Meine Unterteilung in *Low-Belt Voice*, *High-Belt Voice* und *Mix-Belt Voice* beruht auf der natürlichen Klangfarbe einer Stimme, was ich durch Beispiele anerkannter Broadway Belter untermauere. Diese natürliche Klangfarbe bezeichnet Roland Barthes⁸ als "Stimmkern," was die Frage aufwirft, ob dieser ein Geschenk der Natur oder erlernbar ist.

Deshalb betrachte ich in Folge den Diskurs der Stimmforschung und der Gesangspädagogik zu Belting. Ich stelle fest, dass sich die Stimmforschung auf das Verständnis des physiologischen Zustandes während der Tonproduktion konzentriert, während der Diskurs bekannter Stimmpädagogen, zum Beispiel Jeanette LoVetri⁹ und Cathrine Sadol-Lin,¹⁰ vor allem Beschreibungen des Belt Sounds beinhaltet. In Anlehnung an Richard Millers¹¹ Aussage, dass für jede Art von Tonproduktion ein richtiger Weg für die Stimme gefunden werden kann, diskutiere ich eine modifizierte Form der *Bel canto* Technik zur Ausbildung der individuellen Beltstimme, betone jedoch, dass Stimmtechnik im Allgemeinen nur eine unterstützende Funktion haben kann und die Klangschönheit einer Beltstimme von der Wahrnehmung des Publikums im musikalischen Kontext abhängt.

Anschließend betrachte ich Belting im Zusammenhang mit Mikrofonverstärkung. Durch den Gebrauch von Mikrofonen im Broadway Musical ab den 1950er Jahren verlor die natürliche Lautstärke einer Beltstimme an Bedeutung und die Soundqualität veränderte sich, was jedoch einem intensiveren, emotionalen Ausdruck zugutekam. Ich beziehe mich hier wieder auf Barthes,¹² und argumentiere, dass – im

⁶ Siehe u.a. Sundberg, *The Science of the Singing Voice*.

⁷ Siehe Millhouse and Clermont, "Perceptual Characterisation of the Singer's Formant Region: A Preliminary Study."

⁸ Siehe Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice – Interviews 1962–1980*.

⁹ Siehe LoVetri, "Voice Pedagogy: Female Chest Voice."

¹⁰ Siehe Alchetron, "Edge (formerly 'Belting'))."

¹¹ Siehe Richard Miller cit. in Sataloff, *Treatment of Voice Disorders*.

¹² Siehe Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice – Interviews 1962–1980*.

Gegensatz zum klassischen Schöngesang – Musical Belting nicht “Singen an sich” ist, sondern der Interpretation einer Rolle dient.

Dies führt mich zum Diskurs über ausgewählte Broadway Belter, deren größtes Talent¹³ Gesang, Schauspiel oder Tanz ist, obwohl Belten als gesanglicher Ausdruck im Musiktheater eigentlich im Vordergrund stehen sollte. Ich betrachte hier die schauspielernde Sängerin und die singende Schauspielerin, sowie den sogenannten *Triple Threat* – eine Musicaldarstellerin die ihr vorrangiges Talent, in der Regel den Tanz, mit den beiden anderen Ausdrucksformen zugunsten der Rolle bestmöglich kombiniert. Zum Abschluss dieses Kapitels stelle ich fest, dass die individuelle Beltstimme zwar die wichtigste Ausdrucksform für einen Broadway Belt bleibt, jedoch, je nach Musical, Tanz und Schauspiel zugunsten einer Rolleninterpretation in den Vordergrund treten können.

Kapitel drei, *The Broadway Belt – Star, Diva, and Hard-Working Woman* konzentriert sich auf den Broadway Belt als künstlerische Persönlichkeit. Bezugnehmend auf David Gravers¹⁴ Konzept, Bühnepersönlichkeiten nicht nur auf der Bühne zu betrachten, sondern ihre Selbstdarstellung im öffentlichen Leben und deren Rezeption des Publikums zu berücksichtigen, kategorisiere ich ausgewählte Broadway Belter nach Persönlichkeitsmerkmalen, die im Diskurs um ihr Auftreten in der Öffentlichkeit erkennbar sind. Ich schränke den *Star*-Begriff, wie ihn Hans-Otto Hügel¹⁵ benutzt, ein und betrachte eine Auswahl der bedeutendsten Broadway Belter des 20. Jahrhunderts zunächst vorrangig durch ihren *talentbedingten* Erfolg als Stars. Meine Recherchen haben ergeben, dass diese Erfolge alle auf Werken von John Kander, Jerry Herman, Jule Styne und Stephen Sondheim beruhen und deren Musicals im Gegenzug ebenso erfolgreich wurden. Ich stelle fest, dass seit den 1980er Jahren ein Mangel an neuen Star-Vehikeln und den dazugehörigen neugeborenen Stars entstanden ist, woran sich vor allem die neu entstandenen Gattungen des *Konzeptmusicals* und des *Mega-musicals* als schuldig erweisen. Nichtdestotrotz werden etablierte

¹³ Wohlwissend, dass Talent oft nicht genügt und erst durch Ausbildung zu Können wird, bevorzuge ich dennoch in meiner Dissertation überwiegend den Begriff “Talent,” da – wie ich in meiner Arbeit zeigen werde – Belting mehr beinhaltet als erlernte Stimmtechnik.

¹⁴ Siehe Graver, “The Actor’s Bodies.”

¹⁵ Siehe Huegel, “Star.”

Broadway Stars der vorherigen Generation nach wie vor in Wiederaufnahmen erfolgreicher Starvehikel gefeiert und dadurch zur *Broadway Diva*, und ihr mehrfach erfolgreiches Starvehikel zu einem *Diva Musical*.

In Anlehnung an Michelle Dvoskin¹⁶ betrachte ich verschiedene Diva Rollen, deren überlebensgroße, weibliche Charaktere jeweils im Zentrum eines Diva Musicals stehen. Dvoskins Ansatzpunkt, dass Diva Rollen in ihrer Darstellung starker Frauen gesellschaftliche Kritik üben, weite ich durch die nähere Betrachtung von *Big Lady* Diva Rollen, *Anti-Hero* Charakteren und Rollen für Nachwuchs-Divas aus. Dieser Kategorisierung von Diva Rollen steht eine weitere von Künstlerpersönlichkeiten ausgewählter Belter als "Diva Typen" gegenüber. Dadurch kann ich deutlich zeigen, dass der größte Erfolg eines Broadway Belts in der Regel dann eintritt, wenn sich Diva Rolle und Diva Typ nahezu entsprechen. Da ich, wie Dvoskin, diese Diva Rollen als feministisch betrachte, schließe ich daraus, dass die Künstlerpersönlichkeit der entsprechenden Broadway Diva ebenso feministische Züge aufweisen muss. Zusätzlich ziehe ich hier Stacy Wolfs¹⁷ Studien heran, die die Diva als ein Phänomen des Bühnenlebens *und* der Gesellschaft betrachtet. Zusammenfassend schließe ich daraus, dass ein Broadway Belt *gender performance* praktiziert, sowohl auf der Bühne, als auch im täglichen Leben: Die Elite-Musicaldarstellerin erhebt ihre Stimme in unkonventionellen Frauenrollen auf der Bühne und als Feministin in ihrer Position als öffentliche Figur der amerikanischen Gesellschaft.

Daraus ergibt sich meine nächste Fragestellung, die sich nun auf den Zusammenhang zwischen Musical Belting in feministischen Frauenrollen auf der Bühne, und öffentlichen Äußerungen eines Broadway Belts zu Feminismus und sozialen und politischen Missständen bezieht. Meine Diskursanalyse ermöglicht es, Broadway Belter wie Ethel Merman und Carol Channing als Persönlichkeiten des öffentlichen Lebens im Zusammenhang mit der zweiten und dritten Feminismus-Welle des 20. Jahrhunderts zu betrachten. Ihre künstlerischen Persönlichkeiten und ihre Rollenprofile können als repräsentative Vorreiter gesellschaft-

¹⁶ Siehe Dvoskin, "Embracing Excess: The Queer Feminist Power of Musical Theatre Diva Roles."

¹⁷ Siehe Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria – Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical*.

licher Veränderungen interpretiert werden. Zeitgleich zum gesellschaftlichen Rückschlag des Feminismus in der Reagan Ära, wandelte sich in den 1980er Jahren auch die Position des Broadway Belts. Statt in Hauptrollen waren Beltstimmen nun vor allem in entbehrlichen Nebenrollen ohne feministische Botschaft zu hören. Ich lehne mich in meiner Betrachtung wieder an die Ausführungen von Wolf¹⁸ an, die die Herabsetzung des Broadway Belt an den Rand der Bedeutungslosigkeit aufzeigt. Jedoch zeige ich anhand von Beispielen, dass sowohl der Broadway Belt als auch der Feminismus diese Rückschläge überlebten, eine neue Generation junger Belter in jugendlichen Rollen heranwuchs und Broadway Diven in Musical *Revivals* immer wieder ihren außergewöhnlichen Status demonstrieren können. Daraus wird jedoch auch der Mangel an neuen Broadway Diven und Diva Musicals mit Diva Rollen ersichtlich: Es ist der jüngeren Generation kaum möglich, in einer Nebenrolle mit einem einzigen Belt Song langfristig auf sich aufmerksam zu machen, geschweige denn eine künstlerische Persönlichkeit zu entwickeln, deren Stimme auch außerhalb des Theaters Gehör findet, wie dies zum Beispiel bei Patti LuPone der Fall ist. Ich gehe in diesem Zusammenhang mit der Feststellung von Dean Adams¹⁹ konform, dass in neueren Musicals zwar viele weibliche Charaktere weiterentwickelt wurden, jedoch immer noch überwiegend als zweidimensional dargestellt werden und in den Musicalgeschichten vor allem männlichen Interessen dienen. Aus diesem Grund benötigt das Broadway Musical dringend feministische Hauptrollen für Darstellerinnen aller Ethnizitäten, Kleidergrößen, jeden Aussehens und unabhängig von Gender Spezifikationen, damit der Broadway Belt nicht nur seine Position als Erfolgsgarant des Broadway Musicals zurückgewinnt, sondern auch als repräsentative Stimme im Kampf um Gleichberechtigung in der amerikanischen Gesellschaft.

Dies führt mich zum letzten Punkt des dritten Kapitels, die nähere Betrachtung afro-amerikanischer Broadway Belter, deren Rollenprofile und Erfolge, und ihrer künstlerischen Persönlichkeit und Position in

¹⁸ Siehe *Changed for Good – A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*.

¹⁹ Adams, “The Producers and Hairspray: The Hazards and Rewards of Recursive Adaptation.” 597.

der amerikanischen Gesellschaft. Hier wird nochmals deutlich, dass der Broadway Belt trotz seiner Wurzeln in afro-amerikanischen, musikalischen Traditionen ein “weißes Phänomen” ist und afro-amerikanische Broadway Belter fast ausschließlich in Klischee-Rollen erfolgreich werden. Sogenannte *color-blind* oder *color-conscious* Castings bleiben eine Ausnahme. Bezugnehmend auf Einzelerfolge afro-amerikanischer Broadway Belter betrachte ich den Diskurs über afro-amerikanischen Feminismus und Rassismus am Broadway und mache hier auf Stiftungen wie *Women of Color on Broadway*²⁰ und *The Lillys*²¹ aufmerksam, die sich darum bemühen, den Anteil an Frauen, insbesondere afro-amerikanischen Frauen und „Women of Color“ im Allgemeinen, am Broadway deutlich voranzutreiben. Hiermit gehe ich auf die Intersektionalität von Antifeminismus und Rassismus (nach Kimberlé Crenshaw²²) in der Welt des Broadway Musicals ein und dehne diese auf *Genderqueerness* aus. Abschließend betone ich die Notwendigkeit neuer und wiederaufgenommener Broadway Musicals mit ethnisch- und gender-unabhängigen, feministischen Charakteren und ein erforderliches Wiedererstarken der Position des Broadway Belt im Broadway Musical zugunsten einer positiven Entwicklung von Geschlechter- und Rassengleichheit im Amerikanischen Musiktheater und in der amerikanischen Gesellschaft im Allgemeinen.

Kapitel vier konzentriert sich auf ein konkretes Fallbeispiel, die Rolle der Rose im Musical *Gypsy*. Zuerst betrachte ich kurz Rose Hovick, an deren Persönlichkeitsprofil Arthur Laurents die Rolle der Rose grob angelegt hatte. Im Anschluss untersuche ich den Diskurs über die einzelnen Darstellerinnen der Originalproduktion und der vier Wieder-aufnahmen am Broadway, Ethel Merman, Angela Lansbury, Tyne Daly, Bernadette Peters und Patti LuPone. Hier arbeite ich heraus, dass – mit Blick auf die jeweilige Ära und deren gesellschaftliche, insbesondere feministische Entwicklungen – jede Interpretin die Rolle aus einem persönlichen Blickwinkel heraus interpretiert, der ihrer Künstlerpersön-

²⁰ Siehe Teeman, “See Us, Trust Us, Employ Us: Broadway’s Women of Color on Confronting Racism – and Reshaping Theater”.

²¹ Siehe The Lillys Board of Directors, “The Lillys”.

²² Siehe Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.”

lichkeit entspricht und ihr primäres Talent (Gesang oder Schauspiel) hervorhebt. Ebenso betrachte ich, wie der jeweilige Broadway Belt in der Rolle der Rose rezipiert wird. Die Zeitlosigkeit der Rolle, der Erfolg des Originals und jeder preisgekrönten Wiederaufnahme des Musicals mit einem gefeierten Broadway Belt, wirft die Frage auf, ob es eine neue Generation von Broadway Diven gibt, die Rose und auch andere Diva Rollen mit vergleichbarem Erfolg porträtieren könnten. Neben einer künstlerischen Maturität wie sie Holley Replegole-Wong²³ fordert, benötigt eine Broadway Diva für eine Rolle wie Rose eine überlebensgroße künstlerische Persönlichkeit, die *Everyday Divas*, wie Wolf²⁴ Broadway Stars des 21. Jahrhunderts bezeichnet, fehlt – womit eine altersgerechte Darstellung der Rose kompromittiert scheint. Ich stimme hier mit Wolf überein, dass die Everyday Diva nur im Zusammenhang mit ihrer Rolle existiert und im Gegensatz zu den Broadway Diven des 20. Jahrhunderts wenig bis gar keine gesellschaftliche Relevanz hat. Den maßgeblichen Unterschied zwischen einer Everyday Diva und einer Broadway Diva bezeichnet Mark Robinson²⁵ als das *Je Ne Sais Quoi* eines Elite Broadway Belt des 20. Jahrhunderts. Ich schließe aus dieser Betrachtung, dass es zur Verkörperung einer Diva Rolle nicht genügt, künstlerische Star Qualitäten zu besitzen, sondern eine starke künstlerische Persönlichkeit mit feministischen Zügen jenseits der Bühne erforderlich ist.

Als Nächstes komme ich auf das konkrete Fallbeispiel Rose in *Gypsy* zurück und trenne ihre gesellschaftliche Position als eine alleinstehende, mehrfach geschiedene Frau von ihrer Position als Mutter, die ihre beiden Töchter zu Stars machen möchte. Ich betrachte hier den Diskurs der Broadway Belter, die die Rolle der Rose am Broadway verkörpert haben und setze diesen in einen historisch-zeitlichen Zusammenhang, um die Weiterentwicklung des Charakters durch die jeweilige Interpretin in Zeitabständen von bis zu 15 Jahren zwischen den einzelnen Wiederaufnahmen aufzuzeigen. Ich greife hier auf Millie Taylors²⁶ Ausführungen zurück, dass Zuschauer sich mit dem Rollencharakter identifizieren (füge jedoch hinzu, dass, im Falle eines negativen Charakters, eine Ablehnung oder eine Faszination für „das

23 Siehe Replegole-Wong, „Stars and Fans.“

24 Siehe Wolf, *Changed for Good – A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*.

25 Siehe Robinson, „The 7 Qualities That Define a Broadway Diva“.

26 Siehe Taylor and Symonds, *Studying Musical Theatre – Theory and Practice*.

Böse“ möglich ist), dies auf die Interpretin übertragen und komme zu dem Ergebnis, dass diese gemischte Wahrnehmung der Rolle und der jeweiligen Interpretin dem Charakter Rose Leben einhauchen. Daraus schließe ich, dass, je besser die Rolleninterpretation zur künstlerischen Persönlichkeit der Interpretin passt, desto besser das Musical und der Broadway Belt rezipiert werden.

Als letzten Punkt meiner Ausführungen betrachte ich den Song “Rose’s Turn” und den dazugehörigen Monolog. Im direkten Vergleich stelle ich Mermans Originalversion und die ihrer vier Nachfolgerinnen vor. Auch wenn eine solche Betrachtung zwangsläufig subjektiven Charakter haben muss, beeinflusst durch eigene emotionale Erfahrungen, momentane Eindrücke, genrebezogene Hörerfahrung und, in meinem Fall, die Erfahrung als Sängerin und Gesangspädagogin, ist es mir wichtig zu zeigen, dass jede Interpretin auf ihre Art mit der Rolle verschmelzt und Rose lebendig werden lässt, indem sie ihr primäres Talent (Gesang oder Schauspiel), und ihre künstlerische Persönlichkeit gleichermaßen nutzt. Dennoch lassen sich alle Interpretinnen am Ende des Songs für einen kurzen Augenblick darauf ein, aus der Rolle herauszutreten, um dem Publikum das zu geben, was es vor allem anderen sehen möchte: seine Broadway Diva, den Broadway Belt. Entspricht deren Erscheinungsbild den Vorstellungen des Publikums, erfüllt der Broadway Belt alle Bedingungen einer Diva, wird der Broadway Belt als Solche gefeiert und macht das Musical (nochmals) erfolgreich. Dieses Beispiel zeigt: ein Broadway Belt benötigt eine Diva Rolle – und ein Diva Musical einen Broadway Belt.

Abschließend betone ich nochmals die dringende Notwendigkeit *neuer* feministischer Rollenprofile für Broadway Belter jedweder Ethnizität, die dadurch als Stimme der amerikanischen Öffentlichkeit mit ihren starken Frauenpersönlichkeiten auch außerhalb des Theaters am Kampf um soziale Gleichberechtigung teilnehmen können. Ich erinnere daran, dass im Fortschritt von Kultur und Gesellschaft die lauteste Stimme weiter reicht als die modernste Technik und die Stimme des Broadway Belts sehr gut dafür geeignet ist.

In der Konklusion zeige ich nochmals die Zielsetzung dieser Dissertation auf.

Zusammenfassend stelle ich in historischer Abfolge Parallelen und Zusammenhänge zwischen Feminismus und dem Broadway Belt dar und beziehe hier jeweils auch chronologisch die Situation von Afro-Amerikanerinnen mit ein. Ich fasse meine Ergebnisse bezüglich des Star- und Diva Status des Broadway Belts sowie die des Fallbeispiels Rose zusammen und erläutere abschließend nochmals die Eigenschaften einer Beltstimme und deren Wandel und Bedeutung in der Entwicklung des Broadway Musicals.

Ich möchte mit meiner Dissertation eine Brücke zwischen verschiedenen Disziplinen schlagen, für diverse Forschungsfelder relevant sein und dort Diskussionen anregen: In Studien der amerikanischen Kultur, Gender und Ethnizität Studien, Soziologie, Musikwissenschaft, Stimmforschung und Gesangspädagogik und in meinem Fach der Theaterwissenschaft bieten sich zahlreiche Möglichkeiten, meine Forschungsergebnisse zu nutzen und weiter zu entwickeln. Auch wenn mein Thema sich ausschließlich auf amerikanisches Musiktheater konzentriert, ist es möglich, die Resultate für zukünftige Forschungen in Europa im allgemeinen und Deutschland im Besonderen zu nutzen und möglicherweise kulturelle Parallelen oder Gegensätze aufzuzeigen und auch hier eine Beitrag zu gesellschaftlicher Gleichstellung zu leisten.

Die Stärke meiner Arbeit liegt darin, den Broadway Belt nicht nur in Bezug auf die Belt Stimme oder als Element des Broadway Musicals zu betrachten, sondern seine repräsentative, gesellschaftliche Funktion insbesondere bezüglich Feminismus und Anti-Rassismus aufzuzeigen. Kultureller, sozialer und politischer Fortschritt benötigt eine starke Stimme, die dafür eintritt. In jedem dieser Bereiche gibt es vergleichbare Gallionsfiguren wie dies der Broadway Belt mit seiner Belstimme für das Broadway Musical ist. Eine starke Stimme für Werte wie Gender- und Rassengleichheit einzusetzen, hält den Diskurs zu diesen Werten der Menschlichkeit aufrecht und trägt damit zum Fortschritt der Menschheit bei.

München, Juni 2020

Christin Bonin

The Broadway Belt
The Musical Diva and Her Belt Voice from
Technical, Ethnic, and Feminist Perspectives

1 Introduction

In many Broadway musicals, there is a musical moment the audience is waiting for. This is the moment when a certain female performer sings a song about her character's self-assertiveness at the end of act one, or another song, near the end of act 2, when the character realizes that her hopes and desires from the beginning have been fulfilled – or destroyed. Long after the audience has left the theater, this song might remain in their memories; they will hum the melody on their way home and true fans will learn the song's lyrics and sing (or try to) along with the original cast recording. If a new musical with such a song becomes successful, the musical's creatives¹ and the respective female performer originating the portrayal of such a character make Broadway musical history and the female musical performer becomes a star. Additionally, if she sings that song with an idiosyncratic, non-classical voice, critics and fans may start to see her as a member of an elite group of performers and may well bestow upon her the honorific title of *Broadway Belt*.

The female musical performer in Broadway musical theatre is an American² cultural phenomenon meriting an academic analysis in its entirety, and the Broadway Belt deserves particular attention for her ties to the development of Broadway musical theatre and her impact on the American social order. The term "belt" as in *belter* and *belting*, has its roots in the expression "to belt out," which basically means to sing loudly. Looking into Broadway musical history, if a female performer sings loudly in a portrayal and does not use a classical vocal technique, in this case, she usually is playing a strong, independent character who is not guaranteed to fall into the arms of a man at the end of the show to live happily ever after. Such a character may have accomplished something for herself or another character or taken part in a bigger cause by adopting a political or social position in the plot. The stronger the character appears to be, the harder the belt songs are to sing and the

¹ Mainly composer, playwright and lyricist, but also often choreographer and director.

² In this dissertation, the terms America and American(s) are used with regard to the *United States of America* and their citizens and residents, excluding Latin America and South America and their citizens, which are not subject of this dissertation.

more complex the acting aspects of the musical role become. Additionally, if there is dancing involved in a portrayal, belting and acting but without being a trained dancer, might not be enough for a successful performance. Consequently, to get a chance to earn the appellation “Broadway Belt,” a female Broadway musical performer first needs to be cast for a strong character in a new, promising musical or the revival of such a show. She needs to have musical talent³ (above and beyond simply a trainable singing voice) and good acting skills and, depending on the role, to be at least enough of a dancer to fulfill the choreographer’s demands. By logical consequence, the more effectively these skills come together, especially in a so-called *triple threat*, the more likely she will get the part. However, there appears to be something more that she needs in order to become the star in a new Broadway musical *and* to remain recognized as an elite Broadway Belt for the rest of her life.

While the first Broadway Belt, Ethel Merman, and some of her successors, like Patti LuPone, are primarily praised for their loud, strong singing voices, other recognized belters, like Angela Lansbury, are celebrated for their acting abilities, or, like Carol Channing, admired for her idiosyncratic personality as seen in public appearances – even though their belt voices are (arguably) of less musical quality than Merman’s. Belt voices of prize-winning Broadway belters contrast so notably in sound quality, range, loudness, timbre, and versatility, that the question of how a belt voice *should* sound appears to be difficult to answer. Likewise, the public images of these performers are as distinctive as the roles they portray: Bernadette Peters’s image as sweet and cute and her characters of fragile women getting stronger; Gwen Verdon’s and Chita Rivera’s appearances as always-hard-working dancers striving to accomplish a choreographer’s high demands; Dame Lansbury’s classy attitude and rendition of Big Lady roles; and LuPone’s Italian temperament, revealed in public outbursts, that shines especially through her portrayals of unsympathetic characters. Every Broadway Belt shows

³ Speaking of this reference to *talent*, of course it is crucial to keep in mind that any talent becomes a learned *skill* through training. However, specifically concerning the belt voice, I generally prefer to use the term “talent” in this dissertation since belting, even trained, is very different from a classically-trained voice, and especially as the phenomenon of a belt voice includes something that cannot be learned or taught, as I will demonstrate.

characteristics quite different to those of other belters, yet nevertheless, some end up portraying the same character successfully, albeit in different ways, such as Rose in *Gypsy* or Nellie Lovett in *Sweeney Todd*. The only thing these women seem to have in common is that their portrayals, as distinct as they are, represent self-confident, strong women – and that these Broadway belters share a crucial cultural position in the American society as the most celebrated Broadway divas of the 20th century and beyond.

The recognition of the differing attributes in talent and temperament alongside the phenomenon of their shared cultural prominence might lead to question what qualifies a female musical performer as a Broadway Belt if her main talent is not a naturally big, loud voice? Indeed, the Broadway Belt is tied in with the history and cultural development of Broadway musical theatre itself. However, which musical traditions are at the origin of belting, is a belt voice natural talent or trained into being, and did its sound adjust to the changing aesthetics in American musical theatre, also due to amplification? The roles a Broadway Belt plays seem to have a certain undefinable power and their songs a unique sound – but what could defining the belt sound reveal about these roles, the Broadway Belt portraying the character, and about the emergence and popularity of such roles? Then other questions begin to arise: What is the interplay between the belter's public persona, appearance, and her role's character? Were these characters created for her, or does she merely fit them perfectly? Does her public image contribute to the interpretation of the roles, or does this work the other way around, the roles shaping her public image? What are the audience's perceptions and expectations of a Broadway Belt and to what extent does this correspond to how these public figures present themselves, as opposed to their theatrical roles? More questions arise from there, going beyond Broadway musical theatre, for example concerning the status of a Broadway Belt in American society as an influential star, and as to whether she takes a political position, contributes to social discourses, and, possibly, participates in improvements to the social order.

It is the aim of this dissertation to explore the Broadway Belt from different angles: her belt voice and the development of its sound, how she is perceived on- and offstage as star and diva, her public image

compared to her most iconic portrayals, and – including ethnic considerations – her position in Broadway musical theatre and relevance as a female member of U.S. society. Due to her often idolized image, this celebrated member of American cultural life has taken part in discourses about the nation's broader social and political situation, and her impact throughout the last century should not be underestimated. It is my goal to investigate how she came to become an icon of Broadway musical theatre, the most influential form of American theatre; what defines her; and in what ways the Broadway Belt has become crucial for the American culture and society.

My research clearly requires an exploration of different aspects of the Broadway Belt, contributing to diverse academic fields: Even though the belt sound *per se* is not yet clearly defined, voice research concentrates on physiological and physical processes that come into play when belting, whereas voice pedagogy looks to approach a method for producing an iconic belt sound while avoiding at the same time the pitfalls of screaming or, on the other hand, sounding like a classical singer. In theatre studies, there exist examinations of musicals, characterizations of roles and analyses of interpretations of iconic performers, and diverse attempts at classifications, but none of them particularly center on the Broadway Belt. Musicology concentrates on Western classical traditions and predominantly examines the development of Broadway musical theatre as a genre and its intermediate position between classical musical theatre and the entertainment business, but, likewise, does not take into account its most celebrated icon, the Broadway Belt. Besides my objective to contribute to these academic fields, my dissertation also explores the position of the Broadway Belt as a female member of the American society, touching the terrain of gender studies and, when it comes to African-American female performers, ethnic and American culture studies, as well as the intersection of anti-feminism and racism.

The overarching topics and aims of my dissertation are to explore the belt voice and its sound, consider the implications of the actor's personage of a Broadway Belt, and to present an exemplary case study of the character Rose in *Gypsy*. Since there are so many boundary points to the aforementioned existing studies, it is necessary to further define the scope of this assignment. Looking into the origins of the phenom-

enon, I will analyze the roots of belting as one of the most influential forms of vocal expression in American musical theatre in connection with the social order in American society, and its development into an authentic singing style by idolized early belters. My research concerning the sound of a belt voice and possible explanations of how to produce it will center around the sound of a natural or trained belt voice (even when singing through a microphone). The discursive analysis of the Broadway Belt herself will scrutinize the actor's personage on- and offstage, as represented by the performer and as perceived by the audience. Discussing feminism and racism in Broadway musical theatre in the context of investigating the phenomenon of the Broadway Belt will be based on verifiable facts and numbers and will consider the ongoing discourses in these disciplines. My analyses are intended to consider these intersectional problems in Broadway musical theatre as standing for those of U.S. society, and thus to contribute to the discussion around the advancement of equal rights independent of gender and race.

However, even this list of related topics is too sweeping for one dissertation. Thus, my closer examination of the origins of belting will concentrate on belting in Broadway musical theatre, as the specific genre of American musical theatre. The examination of the belt sound will not consider special vocal effects or technical inventions to transform belt sound qualities like pitch and voice color. Over the entire discursive analysis of the Broadway Belt, I will take care in respecting the human being behind the public image and not venture into any territory that is too personal or private. Additionally, my results concerning the intersectional problems of gender and race should not be generalized or transferred to other disciplines without a deeper look into the main subject of each field of research, since the results here are limited to the Broadway Belt.

In the last twenty years, studies of the Broadway musical became more intensive than before. My review of existing literature began with looking deeper into the musical's history for its cultural importance and its impact on American social order, and I found interest in books like

those by Ethan Mordden⁴ and Larry Stempel.⁵ However, the current state of literature concerning my subject, the Broadway Belt, remains limited. Besides autobiographies and (in some cases, even multiple) biographies like those of Ethel Merman,⁶ Angela Lansbury,⁷ and Patti LuPone,⁸ the female musical performer mainly appears in the works of the genre's critics (especially those of *The New York Times*,⁹ crucial as it is for a new musical's success or failure), interviews about the character she portrays,¹⁰ and obituaries after she has passed away.¹¹

Voice researchers exploring the belt voice publish papers and books about their results, as is the case for Wendy LeBorgne,¹² Harry Hollien and Beth Miles,¹³ and Jan Sullivan.¹⁴ Many of these studies are in close

⁴ See Ethan Mordden, *Anything Goes – A History of American Musical Theatre* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). *The Happiest Corpse I've Ever Seen: The Last Twenty-Five Years of the Broadway Musical* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan and Hounds-mills, 2004).

⁵ See Larry Stempel, *Showtime – A History of the Broadway Musical Theater* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Ltd, 2010).

⁶ See Ethel Merman and George Eells, *Merman* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978). Brian Kellow, *Ethel Merman: A Life* (New York: Viking Penguin, Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 2007). Caryl Flinn, *Brass Diva: The Life and Legends of Ethel Merman* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

⁷ See Martin Gottfried, *Balancing Act – The Authorized Biography of Angela Lansbury* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1999). Rob Edelman and Audrey E. Kuperberg, *Angela Lansbury: A Life on Stage and Screen* (Secaucus, New Jersey: Carol Publishing Corporation, 1996).

⁸ See Patti LuPone and Digby Diehl, *Patti LuPone – A Memoir* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2010).

⁹ See for example Ben Brantley, "Theatre Review; New Momma Takes Charge," *The New York Times*, no. May 2 (2003), <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/05/02/movies/theater-review-new-momma-takes-charge.html>.

¹⁰ See Harry Haun, "Read the Original 1984 Interview with Liza Minnelli and Chita Rivera in Rehearsals for The Rink!" *Playbill*, no. February 9 (2020), <http://www.playbill.com/article/read-the-original-1984-interview-with-liza-minnelli-and-chita-rivera-in-rehearsals-for-the-rink-com-349716>.

¹¹ See Murray Schumach, "Ethel Merman, Queen of Musicals, Dies at 76," *The New York Times*, no. February 16 (1984): <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/02/16/obituaries/ethel-merman-queen-of-musicals-dies-at-76.html>. Elizabeth A. Harris, "Memories of Carol Channing for Whom Going On Was a Must," *The New York Times*, no. January 15 (2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/15/theater/carol-channing-death-memories.html>.

¹² Wendy D LeBorgne, "Perceptual Findings on the Broadway Belt Voice," *Journal of Voice* 24, no. 6 (2010).

¹³ Harry Hollien and Beth Miles, "Whither Belting?", *ibid.* 4, no. 1 (1990): [http://www.jvoice.org/article/S0892-1997\(05\)80083-9/abstract](http://www.jvoice.org/article/S0892-1997(05)80083-9/abstract).

¹⁴ Jan Sullivan, *The Phenomena of the Belt/Pop Voice* (unknown (USA): Logos LTD, 1985).

connection to Johan Sundberg's scientific approach towards the singing voice,¹⁵ or even developed in cooperation with him.¹⁶ When it comes to voice pedagogy, many method books, articles, and websites offer possible explanations of how to produce a belt sound; however, most of these explanations remain limited to describing a possible sound *result* when belting or to give practical, but common advice with little physical evidence or clear efficiency for belting, like those by Jeannie Gagné,¹⁷ Christianne Roll,¹⁸ Rachel Lebon,¹⁹ and Cathrine Sadolin.²⁰ That is not to say that their methods would not result in good belting habits, but, since vocal sound is always also a question of emotional expression and its perception by the respective audience, there is no clear definition of how to produce a belt sound or even *how* it should sound; any method can only be rough guidance for a belter.

Exploring the woman behind the Broadway Belt, as self-represented and publicly perceived, literature is generally limited to the context of her interpretations of roles, like in the *New York Times* article by David Sacks,²¹ or discusses gender and musical theatre from a broader angle, like Grace Barnes' *Her Turn on Stage*.²² When it comes to a deeper examination of female musical performers, many studies take a non-normative gender representation, as does Stacy Wolf in her books *A Problem Like Maria – Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical*²³ and

15 Johan Sundberg, *The Science of the Singing Voice* (Dekalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1987).

16 Johan Sundberg and Margareta Thälén, "Respiratory and Acoustical Differences Between Belt and Neutral Style of Singing," *Journal of Voice* 29, no. 4 (2015): <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvoice.2014.09.018>.

17 Jeannie Gagné, *Belting – A Guide to Healthy, Powerful Singing* (Boston: Berklee Press, 2015).

18 Christianne Roll, "The Evolution of the Female Broadway Belt Voice: Implications for Teachers and Singers," *Journal of Voice*, no. September 30 (5) (2016): [https://www.jvoice.org/article/S0892-1997\(15\)00156-3/fulltext](https://www.jvoice.org/article/S0892-1997(15)00156-3/fulltext).

19 Rachel Lebon, "The Effects of a Pedagogical Approach Incorporating Videotaped Demonstrations on the Development of Female Vocalists 'Belted' Vocal Technique" (University of Miami, 1986).

20 Cathrine Sadolin, *Complete Vocal Technique* (Copenhagen: Shout Publishing, 2000).

21 David Sacks, "She's the Top," *The New York Times*, no. January 24 (1988).

22 Grace Barnes, *Her Turn on Stage: The Role of Women in Musical Theatre* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2015).

23 Stacy Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria – Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical* (Anne Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2002).

Changed for Good – A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical.²⁴ However, as influential as her work, especially *Changed for Good*, became in the development of the idea of my research subject, this study would be unnecessarily limited if it were to focus solely on particular sexual orientations, be it of performers, audiences, or characters. Concerning gender studies and feminism, there is a vast amount of literature available, but only very few works are connected to the Broadway Belt, as are the articles of Michelle Dvoskin²⁵ and Carey Purcell.²⁶ This is also the case for my research about racism in Broadway musical theatre, and I am particularly grateful to have discovered the work of foundations like *Women of Color on Broadway*²⁷ and *The Lillys*²⁸ that allowed me to shed a light on the actuality of that problem, taking especially part in the discussion of the intersectionality of gender and racism (as coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw²⁹). For my case study of the character Rose in *Gypsy*, I have been able to rely on the musical's original book and vocal score, as generously provided by the German editor,³⁰ and on live recordings of Merman, Lansbury, Tyne Daly, Bernadette Peters, and Patti LuPone performing "Rose's Turn" during each performer's respective Broadway

²⁴ *Changed for Good – A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

²⁵ Michelle Dvoskin, "Embracing Excess: The Queer Feminist Power of Musical Theatre Diva Roles," *Studies in Musical Theatre* 10, no. 1 (2016).

²⁶ Carey Purcell, "Has Broadway Discovered ... Feminism?" *Dame Magazine*, no. June 8 (2017), <https://www.damemagazine.com/2017/06/08/has-broadway-discovered-feminism/>.

²⁷ See Tim Teeman, "See Us, Trust Us, Employ Us: Broadway's Women of Color on Confronting Racism – and Reshaping Theater," *The Daily Beast*, no. August 30 (2019), <https://www.thedailybeast.com/broadways-women-of-color-on-confronting-racism-and-reshaping-theater>. And: Victoria Velazquez and Alexia Sielo, "Women of Color on Broadway," accessed November 15, 2019. <https://www.womenofcoloronbroadway.org/our-vision-2>.

²⁸ The Lillys Board of Directors, "The Lillys," accessed November 19, 2019. <https://the-lillys.org>.

²⁹ Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, no. 1 Article 8 (1989): <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1052&context=ulcf>.

³⁰ Jule Styne, Arthur Laurents, and Stephen Sondheim, *Gypsy – Original Vocal Score* (Berlin: Felix Bloch Erben Verlag, 1959). And: Arthur Laurents, *Gypsy – A Musical Fable* (Berlin: Felix Bloch Erben GmbH & Co. KG, 1959).

run of *Gypsy*, as available on YouTube.³¹ Unfortunately, Merman was never videotaped portraying Rose and a recording of Lansbury's Rose from 1974 is limited to viewing at the Library of Performing Arts in New York. However, their vocal renditions were my main interest and while Robbins's choreography is contractually cemented and – at least closely – the same for every new interpretation, I will analyze the available audio recordings of Merman's and Lansbury's renditions.

This can only be a rough and partial overview of the literature I used for my research, its limitations, and its value for my research, but it demonstrates my most crucial reason to write this dissertation: Each discipline slightly touches on the examination of the Broadway Belt and her idiosyncratic vocal expression, but these investigations do not really connect to each other. It is my goal with this dissertation to close the gap, exploring the Broadway Belt within the scope I defined before, and especially referring to the cultural mission of American theatre to question the U.S. social order, particularly in matters of gender and ethnicity.

My relation to the subject is based on my passion for Broadway musical theatre since my childhood. The strong desire to examine belting and the Broadway Belt based on the reality of studies became particularly important for me due to my own participation in the discourse about belting as a singer and voice teacher. Additionally, as I discovered, the overall lack of a closer examination of the phenomenon of the Broadway Belt makes my subject a crucial contribution to research about musical belting. Only by questioning existing points of view, digging deeper into connections between what passes for truth in different disciplines, and discussing existing results, comments, and criticisms, is it possible to gradually know more about the Broadway Belt, advocating for her acceptance as an authentic cultural phenomenon and reaching out for a better understanding of this figurehead of Broadway musical theatre.

Thus, to clearly outline my research question, this critical investigation aims to explore the Broadway Belt through a much broader lens than merely her voice and her roles, and to address the impossibility of

³¹ See for example Rose's Turn, *Gypsy*: Tyne Daly Version, posted by "apsara81cloud," February 6, 2009. (YouTube: Google LLC), 5:05, https://youtu.be/EFqDuY5_fxw.

categorizing her, in that she is as much an icon of Broadway musical theatre as she is an influential public voice for women in American society.

I will begin my work with the assertions that the loud voice the Broadway Belt employs for her portrayals of strong, independent women on stage, and her image, as self-represented and perceived by audiences and critics, are closely connected to each other, unmasking the woman behind the Broadway Belt image as a true feminist; and that the intersectionality of anti-feminism and racism in Broadway musical theatre and U.S. society are ongoing problems. It is then the purpose of this dissertation to find justified truth to stand behind these ideas.

Historically, Broadway musical theatre became a new subgenre of American musical theatre around the 1920s in New York, especially on Broadway with its theatre district around Times Square, the cultural center of the United States. Ever since that time perceived as a truly American art form, musical theatre has a crucial cultural impact on American society and the Broadway musical's leading stars are figure-heads of social importance.

Regarding gender, the link between American musical theatre and feminism reaches back into the 19th century. Women in America had been raising their voices publicly to demand equal rights since 1848, the beginning of the first women's movement, but they wouldn't receive the right to vote until as late as 1920. At this time, the rise of Broadway musical theatre paralleled an increasing feminist consciousness. However, even though feminism had first become a collective movement after the end of the Civil War some half a century earlier, African-American feminism remained subordinated to white feminism. Also, in Broadway musical theatre, segregation was alive and well, and even successful African-American performers in vaudeville and the musical influence of ragtime had brought little change. Thus, questions of ethnicity and racism are as much connected to Broadway musical theatre and the Broadway Belt as is gender.

There would be no Broadway Belt without Ethel Merman, who was the first to be honored with this title due to her exceptionally powerful and thrilling voice that could be easily heard out to the farthest corner of a theater. Thus I chose to work methodically and first explore the voice. In chapter two, *Belting – About Singing Style, Sound and Vocal*

Technique, I will question the origins of the term *to belt out* and the belt voice, along with its sound, as used in the American musical theatre. I will follow the development from early belting in vaudeville theatre to Broadway musical belting by examining the social class affiliations of the audience and female belting performers in view of the formation of an American cultural identity. For this purpose, I will search for early connections of the Bowery, the working-class environment, to Broadway, where the middle and upper classes lived. From a sociological perspective, this is to aim for a better understanding of how belting became the principal performative vocal expression on New York's musical theater stages in a newly developed social order.

As a theatrical vocal style, it is generally assumed that belting matured from minstrel shows. However, I will question whether white men's minstrelsy as a culturally mainstream musical performance really is responsible for the development of belting as a vocal style in musical theatre. Even though influenced by African-American singing habits in genres like spiritual, gospel, holler songs, and shouts in religious services, and often considered to be "singing with a black voice," belting of white performers also needs to be examined, beyond cultural assimilation, as a white phenomenon with its own sound.

This Broadway belt *sound* will be the next topic in my inquiry of the belt voice. Here, I intend to come as close as possible to a definition of the belt sound and a possible belting technique apart from classical voice training. For this, I will explore the discourse of selected voice researchers and voice teachers and their methods and argue for possibilities such as using basic skills of *Bel canto* technique for belting in order to avoid screaming as much as to evade the sound of a classical voice. Selected elite Broadway belters and their iconic parts will serve as examples to confirm the existence of some patterns of vocal technique for healthy belting, even though some elite Broadway belters claim never to have taken a voice lesson in their lives. Remembering that sound perception also depends on the listener, the last part of this section will discuss vocal beauty in its respective musical context.

A continuing exploration of musical belting also concerns its adaptation to the changing landscape of Broadway musical theatre. Since the main talent of an elite Broadway Belt can reside in singing, acting,

or dancing, without having necessarily an exceptionally loud voice, I chose to include the topic of amplification in this chapter. As miking is often considered to have destroyed the original belt sound, I will examine the influence of amplification on Broadway belting from the early use of stage microphones through the broad usage of body miking for every member of the cast.

With my next step, I expect to approach the relation of a Broadway Belt to her voice and her roles. Some musical characters primarily need strong acting, others require a full belt voice, and some parts demand high-quality dancing skills that only trained dancers can accomplish. In line with this, after my inquiry into belting as a singing style, as a possible vocal technique, and into the idiosyncrasies of the belt sound, the question arises as to what degree acting and dancing skills are attributes a Broadway Belt needs – if not always primarily having the most impressive, expressive, loud belt voice, as was the case for Merman. However, apparently, there must exist other – personal – qualities to become a Broadway Belt. So, chapter three, *The Broadway Belt – Star, Diva, and Hard-Working Woman*, will explore the woman behind the Broadway Belt.

First, some terms and their use in this dissertation will need to be determined. Putting Hans-Otto Huegel's article about the terms *star* and *diva* into the context of the female musical performer,³² I will determine the understanding of these terms in describing and analyzing the Broadway Belt and draw a clear distinction between the use of *star* and *diva*. Another crucial term in my dissertation will be that of the *actor's personage*, as coined by David Graver,³³ to examine the image of the Broadway Belt on- and offstage.

The first topic of chapter three will be analyzing the actor's personage of the Broadway Belt. Based on a discourse analysis of selected elite female musical performers, I will create categories for Broadway belters corresponding to their public behavior, how the audience perceives them on- and offstage, and the characters they portray. Through examining the relationship between the actor's personage of a Broad-

³² See Hans-Otto Huegel, "Star," in *Handbuch Populäre Kultur – Begriffe, Theorien, und Diskussionen*, ed. Hans-Otto Huegel (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2003).

³³ See David Graver, "The Actor's Bodies," in *Performance – Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. Philip Auslander (New York: Routledge, 2003).

way Belt and her role, I will discuss the Broadway Belt's path to stardom. Research into which musicals were star vehicles for the most iconic Broadway belters of the 20th century will guide me to the creators of their iconic roles. The discursive analysis of the relationship between the creatives and the Broadway Belt will examine whether creatives built the character for a specific Broadway Belt, or if her actor's personage simply fit the character.

A separate section will treat the subject of concept musicals and megamusicals, both of which contradict the principle of musicals as star vehicles and, thus, the necessity of a star. Discussing the reduced importance of the Broadway Belt in such musicals and the long-time prospective of megamusicals with multiple belters compared to star vehicles and their unique stars, I will argue in favor of the idiosyncratic actor's personage of a Broadway Belt and her talent as a guarantor for success in making her a Broadway diva.

Searching for a close connection between the actor's personage of a Broadway diva and the characters she portrays, my next step is to create categories of *diva types* and *diva roles*. Such roles usually are portrayals of strong, independent women that could be considered *feminist*. Carrying this forward, if the actor's personage of a Broadway Belt corresponds to such a role, the performer might herself be seen as a feminist, and I will examine the extent to which she uses her actor's personage offstage to advocate for feminism, for example, not hesitating to speak out when it comes to politics and American social order. Analyzing the discourse of a possibly feminist attitude offstage and using a historical view to connect such a stance to waves of feminism in the era of the performers' biggest successes, will reveal in which way these famous belters play or have played roles in a rising feminist consciousness throughout their careers (and sometimes beyond).

Since feminism was originally strongly connected to the abolitionist movement to end slavery, the last topic of chapter three needs to be the situation of African-American female musical performers in Broadway musical theatre. Recalling that the origins of belting were connected to African-American singing habits (more or less co-opted into a white phenomenon), I will search for progress in the fight against racial inequality on Broadway, reflect on color-blind or color-conscious

casting and multiracial casts in Broadway musical theatre, and analyze the appearance of African-American Broadway belters and their roles in view of the intersectionality of anti-feminism and racism. I intend to end this chapter advocating for the Broadway Belt (of *any* ethnicity) as a crucial element of Broadway musical theatre and U.S. society.

Considering the aspects and using the findings from chapter two and three, chapter four, *Gypsy's Rose and Rose Hovick – A Case Study*, will discuss the results using the example of the character Rose in *Gypsy*, as created by Arthur Laurents. Only loosely based on events in the life of the original Rose Hovick in the 1920s, the character Rose grew in its theatrical importance and, with it, grew the profile of each Broadway Belt portraying her. I will aim to demonstrate in what ways and to what extent the actor's personages of Ethel Merman, Angela Lansbury, Tyne Daly, Bernadette Peters, and Patti LuPone became not only advocates for the necessity of a Broadway Belt in musical theatre, but also for feminism in the era during which each of them portrayed Rose on Broadway.

Reflecting on *Gypsy* as a diva musical and Rose as an acknowledged diva role, I will first develop my idea of casting female musical performers to portray Rose at an age corresponding to that of the original Rose. Even though, theatrically, it makes sense to cast Rose with a mature, experienced Broadway Belt, I will argue why a more realistic (that is younger) age for Rose could be a good choice for the genre Broadway musical in the third decade of the 21st century. Additionally, it is my goal to advocate for new star vehicles centering on strong female characters, giving younger Broadway belters the possibility to create a unique actor's personage and to become a Broadway diva.

Turning to the portrayal of Rose, the next section concerns the acting aspect of this role. Taking into consideration performers' comments on their own interpretations from 1959, 1974, 1989, 2003, and 2008, I will examine if each interpretation of Rose corresponds to the actor's personage of each Broadway Belt and her potentially feminist position. Since my exploration of the phenomenon Broadway Belt begins with the belt voice, I chose to end this dissertation with the analysis of one of Rose's songs. Remembering that the eleven-o'clock number consists of the realization or destruction of the character's hopes and desires, analyzing "Rose's Turn" will show what each of these five performers

emphasizes in her interpretation of this scene. My analysis will end by highlighting how these unique Broadway divas employ their talents of acting and belting in their portrayal of Rose, demonstrating what defines each of them as an elite Broadway Belt.

As mentioned in the description of each chapter, my main method to reach results will be the discourse analysis. Comments by respective performers, critics and academic literature will be connected to each other to shine a new light on the Broadway Belt with a view to explore her from the angles of different disciplines. Comparing actor's personages and the Broadway belters' self-representations in the context of the audience's perception, will guide the reader to a deeper understanding of the Broadway Belt and the vocal expression of belting in Broadway musical theatre. To conclude, I will summarize the findings I demonstrated over three chapters and explain the contribution of my results to diverse academic fields. My dissertation will underline the importance of the female musical performer as part of the cultural mission of American musical theatre and contribute to the body of research in musical theatre and its intersectional problems of gender and ethnicity, American culture studies, gender studies, musicology, and musical pedagogy.

Thus this study aims to show the multiple layers of the Broadway Belt and her belt voice from technical, ethnic, and feminist perspectives – so that the reception of the musical moment when a celebrated performer delivers one of her iconic belt songs might be imbued with a deeper understanding of what it means to live the life of a Broadway Belt.

2 Belting – About Singing Style, Sound and Vocal Technique

The Term *belting* is commonly used in Broadway musical theatre and pop-music culture and essentially signifies singing without producing the vocal sound of a classically-trained voice. Belting as a singing style has been considered by many to be, primarily, singing loudly without any control or vocal technique, and has even widely been referred to as similar to yelling or screaming.¹ However, it is, on the contrary, a skillful, refined, sustained projection, a high-efficiency phonation² that today is recognized as a vocal technique. Few performers in Broadway musical theatre are “doin’ what comes naturally”³ when it comes to professional singing: Most of these performers take vocal lessons or work with a voice coach nearly their entire professional lives to assure themselves the vocal quality and health they need for long-lasting careers.⁴ Nevertheless, there is no consensus in the academic field as to what belting is, and how to produce the belt sound. It is my goal in this chapter to point out that belting is one of the most misinterpreted terms concerning singing in musical theatre and, hence, the Broadway Belt is an enigma of the American musical theatre.

The first chapter 2.1 *The Origins of Belting* concentrates on the beginnings of belting in New York’s entertainment district at the end of the 19th century and the evolution of the style to become the quintessential vocal sound of Broadway musical theatre. First, it is necessary to highlight the origins of the term belting to discover the social status of early belters in American musical theatre at the end of the 19th century.

¹ Nathalie Henrich, “Mirroring the Voice From Garcia to the Present Day: Some Insights Into Singing Voice Registers,” *Logopedics Phoniatrics Vocology*, Taylor 31, no. 1 (2006): <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-00344177/document>. 11.

² Rachel Lebon, *The Professional Vocalist: A Handbook for Commercial Singers and Teachers* (London: Scarecrow Press, 1999). 117.

³ The expression refers to the song title of a typical belt song from the musical *Annie Get Your Gun* by Irving Berlin.

⁴ Many performers confirm in their biography or interviews that they took vocal lessons or received voice coaching. However, some performers declare to have never or rarely taken voice lessons before or during their career.

Social class frontiers built through class separation are not necessarily the same as the frontiers between musical genres. Stereotypically, the upper-class audience is supposed to find more interest in opera while the working-class audience searches for distraction in variety. I will examine the aesthetics of belting that evolved through cultural exchange between social classes and ethnicities, leading to the development of a new musical genre, Broadway musical theatre. Hence, it is my goal to demonstrate that belting in Broadway musical theatre developed beyond social class separation.

Although the origins of belting are considered to lie more or less exclusively in African-American singing styles, I intend to show that the development into Broadway musical theatre's unique vocal expression mainly happened through the singing style of white performers. To appease the audience's appetite for the new style of syncopated music in the Jazz Age of the 1920s, they mixed their musical culture, generally originating in Europe and especially in England, with African-American musical traditions to create the new singing style, *Broadway belting*. The performers of Broadway musical theatre developed their own sound.

In chapter 2.2, *The Belt Sound*, I will examine the discourse about the sound quality of belting. I will put terms generally used in vocal analysis, like *sound*, *loudness*, *pitch*, *vocal beauty*, and *timbre*, into the context of belting to describe the sound quality of a belt sound, especially in comparison to a classically produced tone. Chapter 2.3, *Belting – Nature's Gift and Vocal Technique*, is designated to first discuss selected chosen results about belting in the academic field of voice research, before analyzing a voice teacher's approaches to a possible method to teach belting. Then, I will discuss how *bel canto* technique can be useful for belting. Since the authentic performance of a Broadway Belt is an aesthetic matter, belting changed through amplification. Thus, my last point in this chapter concentrates on amplification and its impact on belting in Broadway musical theatre. Through foot microphones, followed by the invention of body microphones, belting changed in favor of the emotional quality of a song's interpretation instead of just singing loudly. However, I will assert that amplification does not compensate for a belt voice's unique timbre and powerful expression. Although learning vocal technique can assist a Broadway Belt to develop an individ-

ual belt sound, the Broadway Belt needs to discover the vocal beauty of her belt voice by herself. Chapter 2.4, *The Broadway Belt – A Singer, an Actress, a Dancer*, will explore the Broadway Belt as mainly singer, actress, or dancer. Although naturally talented or trained singers and actresses, as well as experienced dancers, may earn the title Broadway Belt, each belter's concentration on her main talent is significant. Since belting out the songs in a Broadway musical remains the most significant factor of being a Broadway Belt, actresses and dancers need to find the best combinations of their main talent, acting or dancing, with belting. Through the evolution of choreography in Broadway musical theatre, dancers became triple threats,⁵ acting and belting out songs while dancing. Although amplification makes it possible for smaller voices to be cast for a Broadway musical, only triple threats with unique singing voices can achieve an optimized combination of dancing, belting, and acting to successfully accomplish a leading role in a dance musical. Without that certain undefinable *something*, triple threats remain in the uniformity of the chorus line. Nevertheless, before discussing belting in Broadway musical theatre, it is necessary to look back into the American musical theatre before the genre became associated with Broadway.

2.1 The Origins of Belting

The origins of belting in American musical theatre can be traced back to the nineteenth century. When Gerald Bordman writes that “Maud Bevely belted out a medley of cockney music-hall ditties” in a show called *A Bottle of Ink* from January 1885,⁶ May Irwin belted out in *The Belle of Bridgeport* in 1900,⁷ and Gertrude Hoffman belted out the song “Harry, Harry, Won’t You Marry Me” in *Me, Him and I* in 1904,⁸ he uses the expression “belted out” to describe the non-classical vocal expression

⁵ “Triple threat” is a term of musical theatre jargon and describes a performer who masters singing, acting and dancing. See tdf – Theatre Dictionary. 2013, s.v. “Triple Threat.” <http://dictionary.tdf.org/triple-threat/>.

⁶ Gerald Bordman, *American Musical Theatre: A Chronicle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001⁴). 88.

⁷ Ibid. 197.

⁸ Ibid. 241.

of these professional female singers at the turn of the 20th century. At this time, the genre called Broadway musical did not yet exist, but these early belters were already established as professional performers on New York's musical theater stages. Their singing style, completely different from that of a classically-trained singing voice, piqued the audience's curiosity as many sold-out shows confirm.⁹

To approach the origins of belting, it is helpful to first investigate the meaning of the term. In the context of singing in general, the term "belting" is based on the *phrasal* verb to belt out. This expression is considered to be colloquial and is understood as "to sing, play, utter vigorously."¹⁰ In contrast, the noun "belt" is defined as a "flat encircling strip of cloth, leather, etc., worn around the waist or from the shoulder to the opposite hip to support clothes, weapons, etc., or as a decorative accessory."¹¹ This noun may be used in expressions like "squeeze a belt around the waist," "tighten one's belt," "hitting below the belt," and "fasten your seat belt." Diverged from the noun form, the verb "to belt" means "to hit hard" or "to strike."¹² Since it is common use in the context of singing to speak about belting and not about belting *out*, it is crucial for my upcoming investigation of belting in Broadway musical theatre to retain this discrepancy between the phrasal verb and the non-phrasal verb.¹³

In continuing my research about the term to belt out, I discovered its *colloquial* background in slang dictionaries of the English language. For example, *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* places the origin of this expression in the 1940s and explains a belt song as

⁹ According to Bordman, the theatre season of 1898–1899 "was hailed as 'the most successful season the American theatre has ever known.'" See *ibid.* 182.

¹⁰ The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary On Historical Principles. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993², s.v. "to belt out." 212.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 211.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ The results of my research on the World Wide Web for the term *belting out* in the context of singing present principally the term *belting*. My investigation shows that the use of the complete phrasal verb *to belt out* can only be found in the context of a person doing it, for example, *she belted out*. The use of *belting* as a short form of *belting out* can misguide many teachers and singers in their understanding of how to belt out a song.

“a song that the singer can let rip.”¹⁴ NTC’s *American Idioms dictionary* defines to belt out as an informal expression for “to sing or play a song loudly and with spirit.”¹⁵ These slang and informal origins broaden the understanding of the phrase as a *vernacular* expression. Vernacular is a form of language that “a particular group of speakers uses naturally, especially in informal situations and when it is different from the standard language.”¹⁶ However, in the context of art and music, the noun “vernacular” indicates “dance, music, art, etc., that is in a style liked or performed by ordinary people.”¹⁷ Thus, in the context of musical theatre, the term *to belt out* is supposed to concern mainly *ordinary people*. This idiom of the English language describes people in a society “who have no power,” “are not rich or famous” and, by that, “not important or intelligent” or people “in the street” who are just “average persons.”¹⁸ Consequently, the vernacular language defines the term *to belt out* basically as singing loudly by ordinary people in informal situations in a singing style that unimportant, average people like. These explanations show evidence that belting out is originally a term for uncultivated and, thus, non-professional singing. However, belting – the short form of *belting out* wrongfully but generally in use in the context of singing – became a *conventional* term for a professional singer’s vocal expression in Broadway musical theatre during the 20th century¹⁹ that is today’s recognized Broadway musical singing style.

The origins of the term *belting* are crucial for today’s concern over belting aesthetics in general and belting in Broadway musical theatre in particular. As mentioned, belting out a song is originally considered

¹⁴ Eric Partridge, *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English Colloquialisms and Catch-phrases, Solecisms and Catachresis, Nicknames and Vulgarisms* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1984⁴). 69.

¹⁵ Richard A. Spears, *NTC’s American Idioms Dictionary The Most Practical Reference for the Everyday Expressions of Contemporary American English* (Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Company, 1994²). 34.

¹⁶ Cambridge Dictionaries Online / US-English Dictionary. 2019, s.v. “vernacular.” <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/vernacular>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Macmillan Dictionary. 2019, s.v. “ordinary people.” <https://www.macmillandictionary.com/thesaurus-category/british/the-ordinary-people-or-person>.

¹⁹ For example, Kellow writes that “her brassy delivery led critics and fans alike to describe her [Ethel Merman] as Broadway’s biggest belter.” See Kellow, *Ethel Merman: A Life*. 110.

to be exercised by ordinary people, thus, (generally) people without any education – especially without any *vocal* education. Consequently, this vocal expression developed into professional belting in American musical theatre with its own aesthetics and with a sound different from opera and operetta. While classical singing and *bel canto* as its principal vocal technique originate in Europe,²⁰ belting became the unique vocal expression of American musical theatre and, in this context, part of the U.S. nation's *cultural identity*. When Grace Barnes says that "Broadway is generally regarded as the home of musical theatre, and in the U.S. the genre is regarded as an art form,"²¹ and that "musicals are viewed within a historical context as an important factor in the development of a national cultural identity,"²² she confirms Broadway musical theatre as a subgenre of American musical theatre and, thus, Broadway belting as its principal language. Additionally, Raymond Knapp underlines "the work the American musical has done in helping Americans shape their collective identity."²³ Through emphasizing the nation's identity as *collective*, he recognizes American musical theatre as a form of *conglomerate entertainment* and, indeed, belting as its language. Thus, my next investigations about the origins of belting will concentrate on American musical theatre as a conglomerate entertainment.

2.1.1 Conglomerate Entertainment and Class Separation

To confirm that belting in American musical theatre gives America's cultural identity a voice, it is first necessary to look back into the era when American musical theatre grew out of conglomerate entertain-

²⁰ According to James Stark, "the term ['bel canto'] is used for a variety of historical periods and styles." Stark presents wide associations with the term *bel canto* back into the late sixteenth century up to today's primary use for the singing style of the operas by Rossini, Donizetti, Bellini, and early Verdi with its florid vocal ornamentations. See James Stark, *Bel Canto – A History of Vocal Pedagogy* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press Inc., 1999). xix.

²¹ Barnes, *Her Turn on Stage: The Role of Women in Musical Theatre*. 11.

²² Ibid.

²³ Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006). Pos. 210.

ment.²⁴ According to Larry Stempel, up to the mid-19th century, the theater offered a variety of amusements under a single roof, and “a cultural space for musical theatre as a separate entity simply did not exist.”²⁵ Stempel calls theatre in this era “a conglomerate entertainment for a heterogeneous audience.”²⁶ Furthermore, Jean Ferris explains that conglomerate entertainment in the United States in the early nineteenth century was born through European Romanticism, which had dominated European arts since 1825.²⁷ Artists like painters, writers, and musicians searched for independence from European influence and followed their romantic curiosity, pulling deep inspiration from each other.²⁸ This conglomeration of arts became *American* art. Especially the performing arts attracted a contrasted audience from all social classes. Through a major wave of immigration since 1815, the English versions of popular airs originating from European folk tunes were imported from Europe and sung in *American ballad operas*.²⁹ Originating mainly in England, these ballad operas were spoken plays with interpolated songs³⁰ and airs written in

24 It is crucial to understand this expression as distinctively different from the *entertainment conglomerate* between Disney and Broadway which began with the production of *The Lion King*. See Elizabeth L. Wollman, “From The Black Crook to Hamilton: A Brief History of Hot Tickets on Broadway,” in *Historians on Hamilton – How a Blockbuster Musical is Restaging America’s Past*, ed. Renee C. Romano and Claire Bond Potter (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018). Pos. 2010–2012.

25 Stempel, *Showtime – A History of the Broadway Musical Theater*. 26, 32.

26 Ibid. 33.

27 Jean Ferris, *America’s Musical Landscape* (New York: McGraw-Hill Companies Inc., 2006⁵). 78–79.

28 Ibid. 78, 81, 85.

29 As Drew Keeling states, “In the growing exodus after 1815, Europeans resettled all over the nineteenth-century world, but especially in the United States [...] and helped catalyze international cross-fertilization of talent in the arts, sciences, and business.” See Drew Keeling, “The Business of Migration since 1815,” accessed July 1, 2019. <https://www.immigrationentrepreneurship.org/entry.php?rec=281>.

30 Interpolation were songs put in the middle of a play to entertain the audience. “Some were composed specifically for adaptations of the novel, but others were simply popular songs interpolated into particular productions. This insertion of vocal music into stage productions was by no means unusual performance practice for the period and is further evidence of the important role of music in the American theatre at mid-[nineteenth-century],” states Katherine K. Preston, “American Musical Theatre before the Twentieth Century,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical*, ed. William A. Everett and Paul R. Laird (Kansas City: Cambridge University Press, 2017). 19–20.

vernacular.³¹ Since there existed no social or institutional structures to separate these plays from opera,³² French and Italian operas, generally traduced in British English, found their way into playhouses to entertain the upper class.³³ This was basically the only difference between entertainment for the upper class and spectacles for the working class. The performances of plays and operas took place in the same accommodations, used the same stage techniques and the same staff.³⁴ Music was ubiquitous and even part of Shakespeare's tragedies³⁵ which were integrated into American mainstream culture.³⁶ An evening at the theater had become enjoyable American culture,³⁷ composed of a Shakespearian centerpiece, followed by a long play, a farce, or a comic opera as an afterpiece, and different specialties like performances of magicians, acrobats, and minstrels between acts.³⁸ This conglomerate entertainment for all classes was the ancestor of true *American musical theatre*.

However, original American musical theatre evolved not directly from this conglomerate entertainment. As a matter of course, audiences diverged toward theaters they preferred. Thus, upper-class people mostly interested in opera distanced themselves from members of the working class, generally preferring popular tunes, sung in vernacular in a completely natural way. Then, the opening of the exclusive Astor Place Opera House in 1847 provocatively separated upper-class entertainment venues near the junction of Broadway and the working-class entertainment area on the Bowery.³⁹ To discourage working-class people from attending, the opera house management required codes of dress and behavior.⁴⁰ Additionally, operas performed in languages other

³¹ David Ewen, *Panorama of American Popular Music* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1957). 64.

³² Stempel, *Showtime – A History of the Broadway Musical Theater*. 26.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid. 25–26.

³⁶ Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow Lowbrow – The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988). 31.

³⁷ Ibid. 23–24.

³⁸ Ibid. 21.

³⁹ Stempel, *Showtime – A History of the Broadway Musical Theater*. 33.

⁴⁰ Sarah Bean Apmann, "The Astor Place Riot," accessed May 31, 2020. <http://gvshp.org/blog/2016/08/25/the-astor-place-riot/>.

than English were not intended to interest ordinary people.⁴¹ Through attending the Astor Place Opera House, the upper class searched to confirm their social and economic status and to separate *visibly* from the working class. According to Stempel, this act inevitably provoked a conflict between the classes.⁴² The escalation of this provocation led to the events of the *Astor Place Riot* in 1849.

Theater riots were very common in the mid-nineteenth century, and audiences interacted regularly with the stage, giving their opinions in many, not-always-gentle ways.⁴³ Nevertheless, this riot occurred due to a conflict of interest between British actor William Charles Macready and American actor Edwin Forrest, both portraying the lead part in *Macbeth*.⁴⁴ Although snobbish aristocrats were hoping to segregate their *respectable* entertainment from the working class, they had financial difficulties doing so: Unable to survive a full season of opera, the Astor Place Opera House began to operate under the name “Astor Place Theatre” and had opened its doors to variety and vaudeville.⁴⁵ Forrest was one of the first native-born stars in American entertainment, while Macready found himself identified with the immigrants of England’s aristocracy.⁴⁶ When the riot occurred, the audience was mainly composed of native-born Americans of the working class. These *nativists* were mostly descendants of Anglo-Saxon protestants who had fought for their independence from the British Empire as the new country’s founding fathers.⁴⁷ They had developed their own identity and felt great resentment toward new Catholic immigrants and British superiority.⁴⁸ Therefore, when Macready appeared on the stage of the Astor Place

41 Stempel, *Showtime – A History of the Broadway Musical Theater*. 33.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid. 30–31.

44 Apmann, “The Astor Place Riot”.

45 Nigel Cliff, *The Shakespeare Riots: Revenge, Drama, and Death in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Random House, 2007). 205.

46 Apmann, “The Astor Place Riot”.

47 As Katie Oxx states, “*The Nativist Movement in American History* draws attention to the religious dimensions of nativism [...] Fueling the dissent were Protestant groups dedicated to preserving what they understood to be the Christian vision and spirit of ‘the founding fathers.’” See Katie Oxx, *The Nativist Movement in America – Religious Conflict in the 19th Century* (New York Routledge, 2013). i.

48 Stempel, *Showtime – A History of the Broadway Musical Theater*. 31.

Opera House, he represented *the enemy* to many in the audience. Additionally, the great English tragic actor behaved like an eccentric star on- and offstage and often offended the nativist audience with his arrogant behavior.⁴⁹ In contrast, the American native-born Forrest represented for his audience the heroes he portrayed on stage. He was idolized by ordinary people in their resistance to any imposed authority, in this case that of the Astor Place Opera House's management.⁵⁰ Stirred up by the press and the public, the conflict escalated on May 10th, 1849.⁵¹ A mass rally of Boweryites the next day was dispersed by the police and the militia with their muskets and the conflict ended with 22 fatalities and 150 wounded.⁵² Since that day, the opera house became known as *the Massacre Opera House in Disaster Place*.⁵³ This deadly riot became historically crucial and is considered by many to represent the cultural separation between the classes.⁵⁴

The background story of this event offers arguments that this riot was as much a *political* riot as it was about social class separation. The American native-born audience appreciated that Shakespearian plays were turned into familiar and intimate entertainment in their own culture.⁵⁵ Thus, when Levine states that theatergoers made distinctions between Shakespearian plays and the *divertissements* around these works and that audiences mainly came to see Shakespeare,⁵⁶ he confirms that the audience of ballad operas was not exclusively a working-class audience mainly interested in variety and vaudeville. Consequently, this riot was *about* the theatre – as Stempel points out⁵⁷ – but, furthermore, the riot was, first of all, about a truly American musical theatre, created by and for nativists, as much as it was about class separation. When Bruce Laurie states that the political idea of *nativism*,

⁴⁹ Ibid. 28.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 28–31.

⁵¹ Apmann, “The Astor Place Riot”.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Stempel, *Showtime – A History of the Broadway Musical Theater*. 33.

⁵⁵ Levine, *Highbrow Lowbrow – The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*. 23.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Stempel, *Showtime – A History of the Broadway Musical Theater*. 31.

“conveyed a strong sense of class identity,”⁵⁸ he confirms that, on one side, nativism helped to form the country’s cultural identity, while, on the other side, the creation of American musical theatre provoked social class separation. Remembering that bringing opera into playhouses basically created conglomerate entertainment, the cultural segregation that separated the classes caused by this riot was a logical consequence of the circumstances before the riot. Until the introduction of dress- and manner codes by the Astor Place Opera House’s management (as mentioned), the natural choice to visit the theater was based on personal interest, not social class affiliation. Nevertheless, it was the language that was mainly responsible for the audience’s choice: new immigrants and the American aristocratic society generally spoke British English, while nativists spoke mainly vernacular. When Ferris states that vernacular is a country’s language that people hear and speak most of their lives,⁵⁹ it is a natural consequence that American vernacular became the language of American musical theatre for a native-born audience. Additionally, British English also stood for the language of the British Empire, which was another reason to avoid its use in theaters frequented by native-born Americans. The choice of vernacular was a political statement and social class affiliation was less crucial for the creation of American musical theatre in vernacular as it appears. When Ferris states that “a culture’s vernacular music is also commonly heard and understood, without conscious effort on the part of the listeners, and with less training and experience required for its performance than for the performance of so-called classical, concert, or art music,”⁶⁰ she emphasizes the aspect of vernacular as the language of the working class. However, Bordman argues that conglomerate entertainment was *drama-cum-spectacle* that influenced even serious dramas and upper-class entertainment in general.⁶¹ Although the segregation of the upper class and the working class was made apparent through the riot, there was a part of the upper-class society that loved lighter entertainment

⁵⁸ Bruce Laurie cit. in Sheeley Streeby, *American Sensations – Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). 16.

⁵⁹ Ferris, *America’s Musical Landscape*. 143.

⁶⁰ Ibid. 143.

⁶¹ Bordman, *American Musical Theatre: A Chronicle*. 14.

more than opera and members of the working class were looking for a more sophisticated amusement. Thus, it was inevitable that a new social class became responsible for the upcoming development of American musical theatre, a *new middle class*.

As a consequence of nativism and the influx of many new immigrants, the new middle class was composed of members of the working class that were more cultivated than *ordinary people*, and members of the upper class, generally native-born Americans that preferred to hear their own language in theatre, the vernacular. While the upper class of new immigrants brought opera into some great auditoriums such as the Metropolitan opera house, the middle-class audiences preferred to visit theaters presenting shows with dialogue instead of recitative, fewer arias, and more romance than tragedy.⁶²

Consequently, middle-class audiences composed of new immigrants unfamiliar with American vernacular were more interested in comic opera and operetta with dialogue spoken in the English language, while native-born Americans mainly preferred variety and vaudeville that used *their vernacular*.⁶³ Understanding *vernacular* in its primary meaning, a language different from standard language, this vernacular of native-born Americans became the language of the new genre, the *American* musical theatre. Consequently, the vernacular term “belting” became the term for singing in American musical theatre, independently of the audience’s social status. Nevertheless, it is arguable that, in the context of performing arts, “vernacular” also signifies “a style liked or performed by ordinary people.”⁶⁴ Hence, belting is not only simply the original term for singing in American musical theatre; the expression also represents the *singing style* created for the new middle-class audience to express the cultural identity of the American nation. Although American musical theatre is widely considered to have been born in the working-class district of the Bowery, it evolved from the conglomeration of different social classes and their taste for

⁶² Ibid. 13.

⁶³ These audiences would continue to search for their preferences in Broadway musical theatre, one preferring musicals of the so-called Rodgers-and-Hammerstein line, the other attending shows developed from the jazzier Porter-Gershwin-Berlin line.

⁶⁴ s.v. “vernacular.”

amusement. The following chapter will demonstrate at which point *Broadway musical theatre* and *Broadway belting* as its singing style originate from the working class.

2.1.2 From Broadway to Bowery ... and Back

While it is historically settled that the evolution of variety and vaudeville began principally on the Lower East Side and the Bowery, the district of the working class, I will show that American musical theatre developed independently of social class affiliation. *Broadway* existed as a place full of cultural vitality long before the first so-called *Broadway theater* was built. Since the term belting is still afflicted by its vernacular origins and, as such, is considered to be a singing style originating from the working class, it is crucial to examine the connection between Broadway and the Bowery.

Until the city began to expand north in the eighteenth century, the *Broad Way* was poorly maintained.⁶⁵ However, starting at Bowling Green, the expansion of this street renamed “Broadway” became a place full of wealthy residents on the Westside and a center of the American revolution in Burns’ and de la Montagne’s taverns on the Eastside.⁶⁶ The lower east side of Broadway became known as “the Bowery,” just because *Bowery Lane* was the *lower* mile of the main postal route from New York to Boston.⁶⁷ While in 1808 the Common Council’s road committee recommended extending Broadway to the Bowery, it was primarily this lower east side of Broadway that became New York’s theatrical center, marked by the construction of the Great Bowery Theater in 1826.⁶⁸ Fran Leadon states that “the city [New York] came very close to giving up the idea [of extending Broadway to the Bowery] entirely, in which case the Bowery, not Broadway, may have ended up

⁶⁵ Fran Leadon, *Broadway – A History of New York in Thirteen Miles* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018). Pos. 327.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Harold Bloom, *Bloom’s Modern Critical Views – Stephen Crane* (New York: Bloom’s Literary Criticism, 2007). 149.

⁶⁸ Leadon, *Broadway – A History of New York in Thirteen Miles*. 360.

as Manhattan's fabled Great White Way".⁶⁹ That is to say, that, basically, American musical theatre became *Broadway musical theatre* due to the construction of a road that connected Broadway and its mainly upper- and middle-class inhabitants with the Bowery district of the working class. Their cultural lives were geographically so close that conglomerate entertainment became inevitable, and visiting the theater was independent of social class affiliation.

In this era, the theater was mainly a man's territory with liquor and prostitutes which were crucial for the profitability of theaters: Low-class prostitutes got free tickets to theaters sometimes and were seated in the gallery, while high-class prostitutes were escorted by their clients and seated beside them in luxury boxes.⁷⁰ Social differences in the theatre existed but were inescapably dissipated through language and theatrical jargon. Anthony Kroch discovered through his investigation of dialect and style in the speech of the upper class, that "the vowel pronunciations of upper-class speakers, while phonetically much less extreme in their local coloring than the pronunciations of working-class speakers, preserved the same word class distinctions. Fundamentally, therefore, the upper class and the working class speak a single phonetical [sic] dialect."⁷¹ This phonetic dialect became the vernacular of American musical theatre and the language in which to belt out songs.

Nevertheless, this development independent from social class affiliation was still not Broadway musical theatre. Theatre was a big business, but there was a potential clientele completely left aside that stayed at home and did not spend money in theaters: women and children. *Respectable* women were rarely seen in the theater – only as men's guests, safely seated in the boxes away from riots or brawls.⁷² The *New York Mirror* printed as early as 1826 that women in the audience are "the best guar-

⁶⁹ Ibid. 436–437.

⁷⁰ Richard Butsch, "Bowery B'hos and Matinee Ladies: The Re-Gendering of Nineteenth-Century American Theater Audience," *American Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (September) (1994). 380.

⁷¹ Anthony Kroch, "Dialect and Style in the Speech of Upper Class Philadelphia," in *Towards a Social Science of Language: Papers in Honor of William Labov* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1995). 2.

⁷² Butsch, "Bowery B'hos and Matinee Ladies: The Re-Gendering of Nineteenth-Century American Theater Audience." 382.

antee for the gentlemanly deportment of the other sex.”⁷³ Subsequently, museum theaters and their clean, educational, and “morally uplifting” family entertainment like Kimball’s exhibits and P.T. Barnum’s museum reached out to attract respectable women.⁷⁴ These women became known as the *Matinée Ladies*, who visited matinées together with their children for educational purposes.⁷⁵ According to Richard Butsch, “the feminization of middle-class culture, with its strong emphasis on family over fraternity, made these women signifiers of respectability, an important marker used to distinguish class identity.”⁷⁶ Nevertheless, this feminization took another turn when the Matinée Ladies began to contradict their own established gender norms. While in the previous years, actresses were considered little more than prostitutes, in the second half of the nineteenth century middle-class women showed self-assured femininity by dressing like the female performers they idolized.⁷⁷ As a consequence of this historically early feminist attitude, the Matinée Ladies soon began to visit evening presentations and *Ladies’ nights* were created.⁷⁸ It is crucial to keep this feminization on- and offstage in mind for my further argumentation. Additionally, the de-masculinization of the theatre had unexpected consequences: Class and gender codes could not change the fact that intellectual men were tempted to visit the Bowery theaters without their wives where they enjoyed entertainment outside their social class’s propriety and morality: The masculine working-class counterculture attracted middle-class men who were tired of the theatre with its reformed manners and the Victorian ideology in general.⁷⁹ Consequently, despite class separation, American musical theatre remained conglomerate, at least in the audience.

Many readers would probably agree with Paul DiMaggio and Michael Useem, that, generally, “once social classes evolve distinctive cultural preferences, family socialization will be a powerful mechanism in ensur-

⁷³ Ibid. 383.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 384.

⁷⁵ Ibid. 387.

⁷⁶ Ibid. 383.

⁷⁷ Ibid. 393–394.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Richard B. Stott, *Introduction and Commentary on History of My Own Times or, the Life and Adventures of William Otter, Sen.* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press). 219.

ing that such class-related artistic traditions are maintained from generation to generation.”⁸⁰ However, theatergoers of Broadway and the Bowery demonstrated the opposite being right when it came to their amusement. Even though the upper class distanced themselves from the working class through visiting the Metropolitan Opera House and from the middle class through feminization and the creation of family-friendly entertainment, many of these classes’ members visited the Bowery’s theater district for less morally strict amusement. After the Civil War, the theater district became increasingly the place for a growing entertainment business and expanded up-town to the Metropolitan Opera House, where the much smaller group of consequent opera lovers had found its new home. As was the case through the road construction between the Bowery and Broadway, the way for upper-class men to sneak into the Bowery theaters was short. Remembering Kroch saying that “the upper class and the working class speak a single phonetical [sic] dialect,”⁸¹ I would argue that vernacular entered from the working class over the middle class to the upper class *through* the American musical theatre. Consequently, Broadway musical theatre originates as much from the Bowery as from Broadway itself, and that not only geographically, but also socio-culturally. Its audience, and even its performers, originated from all classes, speaking a shared dialect that became the language of Broadway musical theatre – and belting became its *conventional* vocal expression. Additionally, the feminization of the middle-class audience was especially responsible for the development of professional female belting: Idolized by the Matinée Ladies, female belters became recognized as artists instead of men’s objects of distraction. The feminization on- and offstage supported a cause of the first wave of feminism even without the purpose to do so, and belting became its performative expression on New York’s musical theater stages.

At the end of the nineteenth century, female belters presented a form of vocal entertainment the audience wanted to enjoy, regardless of their origins, their social status, and their level of education. Nevertheless,

⁸⁰ Paul Dimaggio and Useem Michael, “Social Class and Arts Consumption – The Origins and Consequences of Class Differences in Exposure to the Arts in America,” *Theory and Society* 5, no. 2 (1978).no. 2 (1978) 142.

⁸¹ Kroch, “Dialect and Style in the Speech of Upper Class Philadelphia.” 2.

how these belters presented their songs is a shameful part of American musical history.

The next chapter will explore the origins of belting as closely connected to America's history of racism and segregation. Although women's status in the American social order progressed slowly at the end of the nineteenth century, the feminization of audience and performers cannot hide the social distinction between white and African-American female belters.

2.1.3 Minstrelsy, Barbershop Groups, and African-American Traditions

Besides the popularity of ballad operas in the mid-nineteenth century, a craze for a new kind of entertainment had begun, the *minstrelsy*. While it is generally assumed that belting has its roots in minstrel shows, the original, white minstrelsy and black-faced singing had an *impact* on the development of American musical theatre, but not directly on belting as its vocal expression. Though I concede that minstrel show songs found a revival in ragtime and are the roots of early jazz music, I will assert that the roots of belting lie more in spirituals, gospel, and the shout, brought into the American musical theatre by *genuine minstrelsy*. By adopting this singing style, white female performers made a clear difference between the vocal expression of the original minstrelsy in their new vocal style belting.

As early as 1769, blackfaced white performers caricatured African Americans, but "Jump Jim Crow" was the first act of its kind on a musical stage and is considered to represent the rise of minstrelsy in 1828.⁸² "Jump Jim Crow" was Thomas "Daddy" Rice's stage routine, in which he imitated with a blackened face the muttering of a handicapped slave and his pitiful contortions.⁸³ This mockery of African Americans needs to be considered as the ancestor of any imitation of African Americans by white performers to follow. Fifteen years later, in 1843, Dan Emmett and three of his friends made an official debut as "The Virginia Minstrels"

⁸² Ewen, *Panorama of American Popular Music*. 64–68.

⁸³ Ibid.

with a new stage act, dressed in blue swallow-tail coats, striped calico shirts, and white pantaloons and, of course, blackfaced.⁸⁴ That is to say, that minstrelsy was not a temporary, but an established performative style. It was only after the Civil War that the audience's preference to see white performers in blackface became undermined by African-American performers switching directly from the plantation to the professional stage.⁸⁵ These African-American groups of male singers became successful as *genuine minstrels*.⁸⁶ They brought a lot of new elements to singing, like syncopated rhythms and blue notes, and also to dancing, like the buck, the stop-time, and the Virginia essence.⁸⁷ These elements brought a new sound and new choreographies to the musical stage and built the foundation of American jazz dancing.⁸⁸ Although jazz dancing would become a crucial element of Broadway musical theatre, at this point, minstrelsy still had no connection to belting.

At the end of the 19th century, *barbershop quartets* became popular in America.⁸⁹ These groups developed in shaving saloons as a vocal group of three or four men.⁹⁰ According to Val Hicks, "Someone would start a tune, maybe even the barber himself, and two or three customers might join in, not singing the melody, but vocalizing tones that harmonized with the melody."⁹¹ From 1880 on, professional barbershop quartets performed in minstrel shows and barbershop singing had its hey-days until the end of the 1920s.⁹² This harmony singing represents no roots of belting in its original meaning, "to sing vigorously." On the contrary, minstrelsy and barbershop singing had considerable responsibility for the early twentieth-century popularity of *crooners*. A crooner sang songs as a soloist, with a soft voice in big theaters, thanks to the

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Henry T. Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface A Sourcebook on Early Black Musical Shows* (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, 2014²). 2.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Benjamin C. Ayling, "A Historical View of Barbershop Music and the Sight-Reading Methodology and Learning Practices of Early Championship Barbershop Quartet Singers, 1939–1963," *International Journal of Research in Choral Singing* 2, no. 1 (2004). 54.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Val Hicks cit. in ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

new electric microphone technology of the 1920s.⁹³ Crooning, as singing with a soft voice, is a vocal expression quite opposite to belting. Thus, even if minstrelsy and barbershop groups opened the door for African Americans into American show business, belting did not develop directly from minstrelsy.

Although the craze for minstrelsy brought African-American musical culture into the American musical theatre, belting originates from another historical source of African-American music. To present the audience something different from blackfaced white performers, African Americans transformed their traditionals, such as ring shouts, work and holler songs, spirituals, gospel, and blues, into theatre songs.⁹⁴ Besides the holler songs, created by slaves singing loud in the mines of Virginia,⁹⁵ and the work songs, sung by slaves in the cotton fields in the South, it is the *shout* – a sub-form of a spiritual – that needs to be associated with belting. Shouts developed in a moment of ecstasy during religious services and ended in hysteria.⁹⁶ Women were known to lose the dignity and devotion they had shown at the beginning of the service and now to scream and move deliriously.⁹⁷ This shouting is comparable to belting, but it was rather an unrestrained form of religious worship instead of a stage performance to amuse an audience.⁹⁸ However, as the following chapter will show, shouting developed into belting, and female belters conquered the theater stage shortly after this period.

Blackfaced singing existed until the late 1920s. As described in an article of the Library of Congress, “some talented people found various ways to challenge the limits of this format and the stereotypes of

⁹³ Kate Kelly, “How a 1920s Technology Made Possible the Music of Love: A 2010 Celebration of Crooning,” *HuffPost*, no. June 20 (2010), https://www.huffpost.com/entry/how-a-1920s-technology-ma_b_618874.

⁹⁴ Library of Congress, “African American Song,” accessed February 28, 2020. <https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200197451/>.

⁹⁵ Slaves sang as loud as possible to bear their suffering in the mines. They *hollered*.

⁹⁶ Ewen, *Panorama of American Popular Music*. 57.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Some readers might remember the famous scene in the musical movie *The Blues Brothers*, when Jake Blues, played by John Belushi, becomes enlightened during such a shout initiated by reverend James, performed by James Brown. Here, the presentation of shouting as a form of religious worship becomes entertainment for the audience, giving an example of the impact of the shout and its connection to belting in musical performances.

African Americans either by pushing boundaries of the minstrel show or by creating their own performing companies.⁹⁹ Out of overstepping these boundaries grew the “black musical,” which became part of Broadway musical theatre. Agreeing with Ewen that the influence of the African-American song on American popular music is evident,¹⁰⁰ Benjamin C. Ayling has a stronger argument when he states that minstrelsy and barbershop groups primarily focused on assimilating to white culture and searched for integration.¹⁰¹ Remembering that conglomerate entertainment provoked upper- and middle-class culture to merge with working-class culture, this was equally the case for original minstrelsy and African-American musical traditions: It was not only the African-American musical culture entering white American musical traditions; equally, African-American performers integrated white singing habits into their performances to find acceptance – or even success, as, for example, Bert Williams.¹⁰²

While genuine minstrelsy is connected to belting through its natural traditions, the original white minstrelsies have one chief ambassador whose voice carries a responsibility for the general thinking that belting originates from minstrelsy: the voice of black-faced white singer Al Jolson. Occasionally considered to have belted out his songs,¹⁰³ Jolson’s voice might be the reason that Stephen Banfield characterizes his style as “arguably the single most important factor in defining the modern musical.”¹⁰⁴ Although Banfield confirms with this characterization that the origins of the modern musical lie generally in white minstrelsy, Jolson can only be seen to be an ancestor of *male* belters who entered the

⁹⁹ Library of Congress, “African American Song”.

¹⁰⁰ Ewen, *Panorama of American Popular Music*. 63.

¹⁰¹ Ayling, “A Historical View of Barbershop Music and the Sight-Reading Methodology and Learning Practices of Early Championship Barbershop Quartet Singers, 1939–1963.” 54.

¹⁰² Bert Williams is considered as a central figure in the development of African-American entertainment and its integration into mainstream musical theatre. Williams was the first African American to appear in a lead role on a Broadway stage. See Cary D. Wintz and Paul Finkelman, eds., *Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance*, vol. 2, K–Y (New York: Routledge, 2004). 1210.

¹⁰³ Michael Campell, *Popular Music in America – The Beat Goes On* (Boston: Schirmer Cengage Learning, 2009). 59.

¹⁰⁴ Stephen Banfield cit. in Stempel, *Showtime – A History of the Broadway Musical Theater*. 153.

world of Broadway musical theatre many years later through the rock musical. I would argue that it was, first of all, his female concurrence on stage, the “*coon*” *shouters*,¹⁰⁵ who developed belting into American musical theatre’s main vocal expression.

These coon shouters were white female performers who sang black-faced, as it was usual in (male) minstrelsy, and used this make-up as a liberating mask: Caricaturing African Americans securely hidden behind a blackened face, allowed white female singers to perform as wildly, freely, and openly as African-American women did while shouting during religious services. In the middle of American Victorianism, which followed the same pattern as Britain’s Victorian era, upper- and middle-class audiences could thereby hypocritically accept a white female performer’s wild behavior on stage without neglecting their moral values. Remembering the feminization of the audience, especially the female spectators could enjoy a coon shouter’s show without ruining their social status. Additionally, coon shouters conquered New York’s musical theater stages by adopting (and developing) the vocal style of the shout, spiritual, and gospel as heard in African-American minstrelsy, not in the original white minstrelsy.

Today, minstrelsy and coon shouting are considered a shameful part of American musical theatre history. However, was it *basically* any more different from Yiddish jokes, Irish jokes, German satire, and British humor? What makes this part of American musical theatre history really shameful is not the mockery on stage, but the continuing racism on- and offstage.¹⁰⁶

Although minstrelsy and barbershop groups brought a new sound into the American musical theatre, it was primarily the possibility to mock African Americans behind a blackened face that allowed female performers to create the new singing style of belting. However, this

¹⁰⁵ In the following text, the use of the term “*coon*” is not meant to be abrasive. It is not possible to avoid it in an academic discussion of its role in the context of musical theatre. Thus, acknowledging its sensitivity, it will appear in this dissertation as part of authentic terminology.

¹⁰⁶ Racism continues. As Lin-Manuel Miranda states: “If I’m standing outside the wrong building in L.A., somebody’s gonna hand me a fucking pair of car keys. Racism is alive and well in this country.” See Lin-Manuel Miranda, interview by Chris Smith, 2018. https://www.vulture.com/2018/12/lin-manuel-miranda-mary-poppins-returns-hamilton-puerto-rico.html#_ga=2.238754176.1077975574.1591608054-2045832935.1591163883.

mockery has an ironic side: Remembering that female performers had a reputation close to prostitutes before feminization, the blackened face turned even the most vulgar show act into a performance and allowed any female singers able to belt out a song to become recognized as artists. These coon shouters became the stars of *vaudeville* theatre. Presenting their characteristics and vocal style (in the next chapter) will support my argument that coon shouters are the ancestors of Broadway belters.

2.1.4 “Coon” Songs, Ragtime, and Vaudeville Belters

Originally, the term “coon”¹⁰⁷ was an abbreviation of *raccoon*.¹⁰⁸ Known as a preferred food source of the plantation slaves, early African-American minstrel songs referred to the raccoon and these *coon songs* became a principal part of minstrel shows around 1850.¹⁰⁹ A coon song was a combination of the melodic patterns of English folk songs and the syncopation and harmonies of ragtime.¹¹⁰ Ragtime, with its “ragged” and – at least apparently – unorganized rhythm, originated in African-American communities like St. Louis and was, at its beginnings, considered disgraceful and even called *devil’s music*.¹¹¹ However, as soon as the Russian-born, self-trained song plugger and composer Irvin Berlin published his song “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” in 1911, ragtime became conventional in the American upper- and middle class.¹¹² Ragtime coon songs became the main attraction in *vaudeville*, the most important theatre form between 1880 and 1930.¹¹³ Replacing minstrel

¹⁰⁷ See footnote 105 above or 119 below.

¹⁰⁸ Richard A. Reublin and Robert L. Maine, “What Were Coon Songs?,” accessed September 12, 2016. <https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/question/2005/may.htm>.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, *Ragged But Right: Black Traveling Shows, ‘Coon Songs’, and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007). 25.

¹¹¹ Kathy J. Ogren, *The Jazz Revolution – Twenties America and the Meaning of Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). 112.

¹¹² Laurence Maslon, *Broadway – The American Musical* (New York: Bulfinch Press, 2004). 8. John Philip Sousa used rhythmic patterns of ragtime in his American marches See The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians. Vol. 6 Claudel to Dante. London: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 2001², s.v. “coon shouter.” 392.

¹¹³ Anthony Slide, *The Encyclopedia of Vaudeville* (Mississippi: The University Press, 2012). xiv.

shows, vaudeville was a “clean and family-friendly” variety show in a vernacular style, invented by Tony Pastor, the acknowledged father of variety and vaudeville.¹¹⁴ A vaudeville show might contain minstrel acts, circus stunts, animal performances, comedy teams, songs, and dances, each with different performers.¹¹⁵ Vaudeville was the best-selling theatrical style at the time and existed side by side with burlesque, variety, and extravaganza.¹¹⁶

A show in this style might be billed as musical theatre, musical play, musical comedy, or just musical.¹¹⁷ However, it was especially in vaudeville where female belting stars delivered their famous coon songs. According to Ethan Mordden,

It was vaudeville, where it all began: all the great vaudeville singers were women, except for a few Irish tenors like Chauncey Olcott. As recordings attest, women like Nora Bayes and Sophie Tucker had not only solid instruments to work with, but The Gift – vigor, pathos, and a sense of structure.¹¹⁸

Besides the racial, even dehumanizing abasement in the use of the term “coon” for African Americans,¹¹⁹ the term “coon shouter” characterizes in a musical context professional performers as specialists in the imitation and caricature of African Americans.¹²⁰ Coon shouters were predom-

¹¹⁴ Frank Cullen, Florence Hackman, and Donald McNeilly, *Vaudeville Old and New. An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America*, Vol. 1 (New York: Routledge, 2006). xii.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ s.v. “coon shouter.” 392.

¹¹⁷ Cullen, Hackman, and McNeilly, *Vaudeville Old and New. An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America*, Vol. 1. xii.

¹¹⁸ Ethan Mordden, *Broadway Babies – The People Who Made The American Musical* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983). 49.

¹¹⁹ As mentioned, the term “coon” is considered to be an offensive slur that was used in this era as slang for an African-American person. While used “casually” at the time, we now are sensitive to it as having been insulting and contemptuous. However, it is not possible to avoid the term in an academic discussion of musical theatre development, as it is the term by which certain songs and singers were identified. See Merriam-Webster Dictionary. 2019, s.v. “coon.” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/coon>.

¹²⁰ Abbott and Seroff, *Ragged But Right: Black Traveling Shows, ‘Coon Songs’, and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz*. 4,15.

inantly white female performers¹²¹ with untrained, robust voices, also called *jubilee shouters* and *camp meeting shouters*.¹²² Vaudeville became a woman's business. As Mordden confirms, "Women were pretty, capricious, torrid. ... They could sing sweet, coy, mean, sexy, pathetic or ironic; what could Chauncey Olcott [an Irish tenor] do but sing sweet?"¹²³ Consequently, the de-masculinization evolved not only in the audience but also on stage. Coon shouters pioneered the Broadway Belt.

Even though their vocal and performance style was highly influenced by the language, singing habits, and movements of African Americans, coon shouters developed their own style and were quite different from each other. Descriptions of these women differ from "blonde and buxom" (May Irwin)¹²⁴ to "tall and quite plump" (Maggie Cline)¹²⁵ or were labeled as "the hottest girl in town and queen of syncopation" (Blossom Seely).¹²⁶ Seely was also said to "belt out a song like no one else."¹²⁷ That is to say, that these coon shouters did not correspond to a certain female type. This point will be crucial in my further investigation of the Broadway Belt. While class separation existed outside the world of theatre, these early belters are a significant factor to support my argument that belting grew up from conglomerate entertainment. Coon shouters from all classes entered show business. From working-class origins were, for example, Eva Tanguay whose movements onstage "suggested sex,"¹²⁸ and Artie Hall, who delivered "an artistic and true-to-nature portrayal"¹²⁹ of a typical African-American woman of the South. Middle-aged performers were called *Red-Hot Mamas* and singers like

¹²¹ Although my subject concentrates on female performers, the term coon shouter was not exclusively used for females. See *ibid.* 23.

¹²² *Ibid.* 15.

¹²³ Mordden, *Broadway Babies – The People Who Made The American Musical*. 49.

¹²⁴ Bordman, *American Musical Theatre: A Chronicle*. 131.

¹²⁵ Cullen, Hackman, and McNeilly, *Vaudeville Old and New. An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America*, Vol. 1. 237.

¹²⁶ Slide, *The Encyclopedia of Vaudeville*. 460–461.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.* 460–461.

¹²⁸ Simon Napier-Bell, "Eva Tanguay – A Rock Star Before Rock Existed," *HuffPost Entertainment*, no. March 11 (2012), http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/simon-napierbell/eva-tanguay-a-rock-star-madonna-lady-gaga_b_1196245.html.

¹²⁹ Abbott and Seroff, *Ragged But Right: Black Traveling Shows, 'Coon Songs', and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz*. 17.

the “short, dark, plump”¹³⁰ Belle Baker, or the “charismatic and temperamental”¹³¹ Nora Bayes, with her “lush singing voice,”¹³² competed both against the celebrated (but “too fat and ugly,”¹³³) Sophie Tucker, with her powerful voice. So did Stella Mayhew who pushed the notes out and often sang the hit song of the evening’s Broadway show.¹³⁴ Their loud voices characterized them as coon shouters, and their *individuality* (and potentially *any* talent attracting the audience) brought them success – even though they might not have had musical talent on a professional level.¹³⁵ However, since amplification on stage would still need a long time to become a standard in American musical theatre, a powerful voice was a primary necessity.

When Broadway impresario Florenz Ziegfeld came up with his concept of “Glorifying the American Girl,”¹³⁶ talent was not necessary to get a job in Ziegfeld’s *Follies*; but good figures, beautiful faces, and good conduct were an obligation.¹³⁷ His extravaganzas were composed of elements from vaudeville, burlesque, minstrelsy, and Tin Pan Alley songs.¹³⁸ Additionally, he hired the best composers, sketch writers, and comedians. One of these comedians was Fanny Brice. Considered as “one of America’s great clowns,”¹³⁹ Brice had a natural singing ability, dramatic and comic talent, and became an idol for the following generations of stage performers.¹⁴⁰ *New York Times* critic Brooks Atkinson

¹³⁰ Oliver B. Pollak. “Belle Baker.” In Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia. Jewish Women’s Archive, 2009. <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/baker-belle>.

¹³¹ Alison M. Kibler, “Nora Bayes,” accessed November 16, 2016. <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/bayes-nora>.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Denner Susan and Lloyd Ecker, “Sophie Tucker,” accessed February 16, 2017. <http://www.sophietucker.com>.

¹³⁴ Bordman, *American Musical Theatre: A Chronicle*. 231.

¹³⁵ Recordings of these singers are available in the National Jukebox of The Library of Congress; <http://www.loc.gov/jukebox/>.

¹³⁶ Maslon, *Broadway – The American Musical*. 18.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ The term “Tin Pan Alley” will be explained in the next chapter.

¹³⁹ Barbara Wallace Grossmann. “Fanny Brice.” In Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia. Jewish Women’s Archive, 2009. <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/brice-fanny>.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

called her “a burlesque comic of the rarest vintage.”¹⁴¹ It might be arguable whether or not Brice was a belter, especially by listening to the song “My Man.” This soft and sentimental ballad became Brice’s most famous signature song, despite her reputation as a comic actress. Nevertheless (in reference to coon shouters as early beltters), Brice set an example and became an idol for the next generation of beltters. When in 1964, the story of her life became the subject of Jule Styne’s Broadway musical *Funny Girl*,¹⁴² the leading lady, Barbra Streisand, became one of the most famous beltters of the 20th century – and still is.

Although Brice grew up as the child of saloon owners in Manhattan fulfilling the cliché of a belter’s working-class origins, exclusively classically-trained singers from the middle- and upper classes also began entering vaudeville. Belting was no longer a vernacular art form originating from the working class when the craze about coon songs hit its peak. Marie Cahill, for instance, was allowed to study voice and ballet and then acting.¹⁴³ Raised by Irish-American parents she had strong moral convictions and her shows were known to be “clean.”¹⁴⁴ Despite her classical education, two of her biggest hits were “Under the Bamboo Tree” and “The Dallas Blues,” the latter of which was, in 1916, the first female blues ever recorded.¹⁴⁵ The lyrics of these songs are not written in vernacular and omit mockery and racism. Bordman writes of Cahill that “she belted out her songs to the farthest reach of the theatre.”¹⁴⁶

Likewise, Clarice Vance appeared on stage in a well-mannered, nearly lady-like style, instead of swaggering the cakewalk.¹⁴⁷ She was one of the first coon shouters to discontinue performing in blackface, although she

¹⁴¹ Brooks Atkinson cit. in Seymour Sy Brody, *Jewish Heroes & Heroines of America: 151 True Stories of Jewish American Heroism* (Hollywood, FL: Frederick Fell Publishers, Inc., 2004). 151.

¹⁴² Grossmann, “Fanny Brice.”

¹⁴³ Bordman, *American Musical Theatre: A Chronicle*. 113.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Library of Congress, “Marie Cahill,” accessed February 26, 2020. <http://www.loc.gov/jukebox/artists/detail/id/1201/>.

¹⁴⁶ Gerald Bordman cit. in Philip Furia and Laurie Patterson, *The American Song Book – The Tin Pan Alley Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). 23.

¹⁴⁷ Abbott and Seroff, *Ragged But Right: Black Traveling Shows, ‘Coon Songs’, and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz*. 15–16.

held a grotesque-looking blackface mask in front of her face instead.¹⁴⁸ Her refined singing style can be heard in “I rather two-step than waltz, Bill.”¹⁴⁹ Vance’s elegant attitude, her clear diction, and her clean lyrics pleased especially the middle- and upper-class women in the audience and brought vaudeville performances to a more respectable level.¹⁵⁰

Another performer of the time was German-American Emma Carus, “the female baritone,” who was renowned as a talented singer with a cultivated and genuine contralto.¹⁵¹ It was Carus who introduced Irving Berlin’s “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” in 1911, and her name remained on the sheet music above the title for all sixty-five editions.¹⁵² Remembering that it was “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” that turned ragtime into conventional entertainment for the middle- and upper class, Carus’s performances support my argument that artists from different social classes were part of this new conglomerate entertainment despite class separation.

So was Fay Templeton, who grew up traveling with her parents’ touring opera company and became an operetta star at the age of 15.¹⁵³ Her talent for comedy and parody was discovered in Weber & Fields’ *Hurly Burly* in 1898, and the vaudeville audience admired her throaty voice.¹⁵⁴ This combination of natural talent and experience corresponds also to Jeanette MacDonald. Winning a singing contest at the age of 13, she was a talented soprano with a range of over three octaves and called the “Iron Butterfly”; she was lady-like and attractive, with blond hair and big blue eyes.¹⁵⁵ MacDonald was the personification of clean entertainment crossing over as a classically-trained singer from opera and operetta to vaudeville and variety.¹⁵⁶

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ David S. Shields, “Emma Carus,” accessed January 25, 2017. <http://broadway.cas.sc.edu/content/emma-carus>.

¹⁵² David A. Jasen, *Tin Pan Alley – An Encyclopedia of the Golden Age of American Song* (New York: Routledge, 2003). 70.

¹⁵³ Cullen, Hackman, and McNeilly, *Vaudeville Old and New. An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America*, Vol. 1. 1097.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Edward Baron Turk, *Hollywood Diva – A Biography of Jeanette MacDonald* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1998). 114.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

Finally, it was actress and operetta diva Lillian Russell, “the embodiment of 1890s glamour,”¹⁵⁷ who best represents the merging of classical singing and belting. Taking vocal lessons in Leopold Damrosch’s teaching studio near the heart of the Bowery theater district, she was fascinated by this shady but irresistible place of the working class.¹⁵⁸ Her career began on November 22, 1880, when Tony Pastor changed her name (from Nellie Leonard) and presented her to the audience as a new star.¹⁵⁹ As the “Queen of Broadway,” she was successful in twenty-four operettas, musicals, revues, and vaudevilles during the 1880s and beyond.¹⁶⁰ Russell was known for being elegant, extravagantly dressed, very good looking, acting in a temperamental way on stage, and singing a “piping high C.”¹⁶¹ John Stromberg wrote the song “Come Down Ma Evening Star” for her, and it became Russell’s trademark number for the rest of her career.¹⁶² This 1912 recording is the only one of her voice, and she definitively utilizes a classical vocal technique, comprised of a light head-voice and a classical vibrato. Since she changed her repertoire early in her career from gentle ballads to so-called *blue songs*,¹⁶³ however, the perception of her vocal expression quickly became that she “belted out” her trademark song as soon as she began performing in vaudeville instead of opera houses, even outside New York City. For example, Dall Wilson wrote, “In a deal struck at – Belmont horse track – more than conveniently located between her [Russell’s] Far Rockaway summer house and NYC, Lillian Russell joins vaudeville’s Weber and Fields to headline at \$3,000 weekly [...] for belting four popular songs twice a day.”¹⁶⁴ This amount corresponds to nearly US\$80,000 per week

¹⁵⁷ John Kenrick, “History of the Musical Stage 1890s: Part II,” accessed December 6, 2016. <https://www.musicals101.com/1890-1900b.htm>.

¹⁵⁸ Armond Fields, *Lillian Russell: A Biography of ‘America’s Beauty’* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company Inc., 1999). 13–15.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Kenrick, “History of the Musical Stage 1890s: Part II”.

¹⁶³ Donald Ray Schwartz and Anne Aull Bowbeer, *Lillian Russell: A Bio-Bibliography* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 1997). 60.

¹⁶⁴ Dall Wilson, *Alice Nielsen and the Gayety of Nations* (Washington DC: Library of Congress, 2017). 166.

in 2021.¹⁶⁵ Russell was a huge star, as this amount of money she made confirms. However, concerning belting, I agree with Armond Fields's statement: “‘Come Down Ma Evening Star’ was a ‘coon’ song, Lillian sang it with the feeling of an opera aria.”¹⁶⁶ Although Russell’s vocal rendition of this song is not classical singing comparable to opera singing, she did not really *belt out* this song. Here, the term “belting” serves more to make a distinction between her classical singing in operettas and operas and her singing in vaudeville, in which she avoided too much vibrato and fully classical tones. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the term *legitimate singing* became established for “singing non-classical songs in musical theatre with a classically-trained voice.” The short form *legit* is today the conventional term in voice teaching to describe a vocal style in musical theatre based on traditional classical voice training without the execution of a full classical vocal technique.¹⁶⁷ Legit became a singing style in between belting and classical singing. However, in the era of coon shouting, the term belting described any singing style used outside opera and operetta, even by classically-trained voices. Again, the singing style of vaudeville was as much a conglomeration of styles as the genre itself before developing into Broadway belting: Highbrow and lowbrow distinction had become unimportant when there was money to be made.

Appearing on the same stage and singing the same musical style, these coon shouters from different social classes and different musical backgrounds influenced each other but kept their individuality in their appearance and performance. *Legit* in musical theatre was (and still is) different from *classical singing* in operetta and opera and affected the natural sound of untrained voices to develop into a more cultivated and less dilettantish belting style. Since all these singers are acknowledged as belters, belting means, at this point in its development in musical theatre, singing with a powerful voice, able to be heard throughout a theater, outside a classical musical context. However, it is necessary

¹⁶⁵ Ian Webster, “CPI Inflation Calculator,” accessed February 25, 2020. <https://www.in2013dollars.com/us/inflation/1912?amount=3000>.

¹⁶⁶ Fields, *Lillian Russell: A Biography of ‘America’s Beauty’*. 133.

¹⁶⁷ Robert Edwin, “Belt is Legit,” *Journal of Singing* 64, no. 2 (2007): https://www.nats.org/_Library/Kennedy_JOS_Files_2013/JOS-064-2-2007-213.pdf.

to keep in mind that the *individuality* of these performers was a main factor in their success.

Taken together, the development of belting happened independently of class affiliation and social order, and feminization on stage and off was a main factor. Broadway belting has obviously its primary roots in the coon shouting by white female singers using imitation and mockery of African Americans as the resource for their performative singing style. However, since they were influenced by African-American musical traditions, the next chapter shed a light on African-American belters and their status in early American musical theatre.

2.1.5 African-American Coon Shouters, Blues, and Jazz

To highlight the origins of belting from all perspectives, it is necessary to examine the position of female African-American singers in American musical theatre. Vaudeville as a big business was an invention of white people, and so was coon shouting. The mockery by *imitating* African-American facial expressions and dance movements, and by singing songs with typical African-American rhythms and sound patterns, must first be considered as the acculturation of white coon shouters to the audience's craze for ragtime and jazz. Nevertheless, it was also a significant marginalization of African-American performers despite their talents and abilities: As theaters filled their stages with imitators, it was simply not necessary to accept original African-American performers on the musical theater stage.

Serendipitously, African Americans were building their own musical identity during this era with blues and jazz and entered the world of Broadway musical theatre through "black musicals" and jazz musicals despite being ignored elsewhere.¹⁶⁸ After the end of the Civil War and the end of slavery, segregation was still present in everyday life and everywhere in the United States. Although African Americans were *free*, they were not really accepted in society. Reflecting Thomas Jefferson's

¹⁶⁸ Abbott and Seroff, *Ragged But Right: Black Traveling Shows, 'Coon Songs', and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz*. 4–6.

1781 comments characterizing African Americans to be generally more gifted in music than white people, especially through their “accurate ears for tune and time,”¹⁶⁹ show business was a promising business for African Americans and those who had talent in singing, dancing, and acting had a chance to get out of poverty and social disruption. Thus, as it was the case for African-American minstrelsy, the best way for female African-American performers to enter show business was to become coon shouters. According to Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, “a subtle modified designation, ‘up-to-date coon shouter,’ became signally associated with the coming generation of female blues singers, including Gertrude Rainey and Bessie Smith.”¹⁷⁰ They blackened their face with make-up and mocked their own cultural background by singing vulgar and racist coon songs. However, even if these up-to-date coon shouters began their careers in vaudeville, they entered American musical history as *original blues singers*.¹⁷¹

For instance, the “mother of blues,” Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, began her career as an up-to-date coon shouter, and it was said that she “always brings down the house.”¹⁷² Her protégé Bessie Smith surpassed Rainey and became the “Empress of the Blues.”¹⁷³ She sang open-throated and loud, often refusing the use of a microphone on a concert stage.¹⁷⁴ Clara Smith became the “Queen of Moaners” and, through years of experience, a professional jazz singer.¹⁷⁵ They all began their career in vaudeville, but, as their biographies show, they left vaudeville to star in Harlem’s Cotton Club and a range of well-known concert halls instead of performing on Broadway. They also entered the recording industry and earned a significant amount of money; other African-American belters, for example Alberta Hunter, Vaughn de Leath, Sippie Wallace, Annette

¹⁶⁹ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Boston: Lilly and Wait, 1832). 147.

¹⁷⁰ Abbott and Seroff, *Ragged But Right: Black Traveling Shows, ‘Coon Songs’, and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz*. 22.

¹⁷¹ Bordman, *American Musical Theatre: A Chronicle*. 191.

¹⁷² Abbott and Seroff, *Ragged But Right: Black Traveling Shows, ‘Coon Songs’, and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz*. 261.

¹⁷³ The Grove Dictionary of American Music. Eight vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013², s.v. “Smith, Bessie.” 546.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Scott Yanow, “Clara Smith,” accessed November 16, 2016. <http://www.allmusic.com/artist/clara-smith-mn0000108444/biography>.

Hanshaw, Bessie Tucker, and Blanche Calloway never even sang – or, at least, sang rarely – on a Broadway stage. While it is true that African Americans in vaudeville could be seen as more pitiful figures in their self-mockery than dignified successful stars¹⁷⁶ (as many became in blues and jazz), they had nevertheless a crucial impact on belting in American musical theatre.

African-American acts in American musical theatre developed from being interpolations in a vaudeville program into “black musicals.” These shows, with an exclusively African-American cast, had their hey-days during the Jazz Age of the 1920s. At this time, vaudeville was dying, and the term *Broadway musical theatre* became established to signify New York’s best musical theatre.¹⁷⁷ As part of a family-friendly and clean Broadway musical theatre, only a few “black musicals,” like *Shuffle Along* and *Leslie’s Blackbirds*, made a breakthrough, and their stars were only exceptionally accepted outside an all African-American cast.¹⁷⁸ For example, in *Showboat* in 1927, African Americans played cliché secondary – and demeaning – roles as slaves or mammies. Nevertheless, black musicals offered African Americans the possibility to appear on a Broadway stage as themselves and not as up-to-date coon shouters. Although black musicals are part of early Broadway musical theatre, they most notably represent the marginalization of African-American performers from the cultural mainstream, what Stempel calls “a presence and an absence, as it were.”¹⁷⁹

Since white coon shouters imitated African Americans singing convincingly, their belting style received a supplementary signification as “singing with a black voice.” Ralph Ellison describes African-American

¹⁷⁶ Although Bert Williams was hired by Florenz Ziegfeld for his *Follies* in 1910 and became a famous Broadway star, it is crucial to know that his white castmates threatened to quit the show. However, Ziegfeld insisted on keeping Williams “because a black man would bring in more money.” See Maslon, *Broadway – The American Musical*. 38.

¹⁷⁷ The term “Broadway” became a trademark used to identify the best entertainment in New York when Long Acre Square was renamed *Times Square* after the renovation of the Grand Central Terminal and the completion of the subway at the Times tower around the year 1904. See Stempel, *Showtime – A History of the Broadway Musical Theater*. 35. Maslon, *Broadway – The American Musical*. 17.

¹⁷⁸ John Kenrick, “History of the Musical Stage – 1920s Part III: Black Musicals,” accessed February 26, 2020. <http://www.musicals101.com/1920bway3.htm>.

¹⁷⁹ Stempel, *Showtime – A History of the Broadway Musical Theater*. 85.

singing as “black singing” employing “the full expressive resources of the human voice” developed in the “black church.”¹⁸⁰ Thus, the crucial difference between white and African-American belting is not that African-American voices are principally more powerful. Originating in the “black church,” as Ellison says, this singing style is the *natural vocal expression of African Americans*, while the belting style of white performers is based on *imitation*. Therefore, if occasionally white elite belters are recognized to be “singing with a black voice,” the expression needs to be understood as the best possible imitation of African-American natural singing habits.

According to Portia Maultsby, “Musicians bring intensity to their performances by alternating lyrical, percussive, and raspy timbres, juxtaposing vocal and instrumental texture, changing pitch and dynamic levels, alternating straight with vibrato tones, and weaving moans, shouts, grunts, hollers, and screams into the melody.”¹⁸¹ While it is debatable if this evaluation is or even ever was exclusively valid for African-American singers, it certainly describes the vocal expression of early blues and jazz singers like Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, and Ethel Waters at its best. While the *jazz craze* of the 1920s brought the *jazz musical* onto the Broadway stage, New York’s entertainment business still marginalized African-American performers as much as possible. Consequently, white performers searching for success tried to develop their belting style through imitation to eliminate the Oom-pah-pah of their European ancestors and contemporaries as much as possible.¹⁸²

However, it is crucial to make the distinction between the jazz sound on Broadway and Harlem jazz: Since white Broadway musical performers had to present a cleaned-up version of the Harlem blues on Broadway, Broadway musical belting does not completely correspond to “sing as much as possible with a black voice.” Original Broadway jazz was a

¹⁸⁰ Ralph Ellison cit. in Farah Jasmine Griffin, “When Malindy Sings: A Meditation on Black Women’s Vocality,” in *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*, ed. Robert G. O’Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).108.

¹⁸¹ Portia K. Maultsby, “Africanisms in African American Music,” in *Africanisms in American Culture*, ed. Joseph E. Holloway (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005). 334.

¹⁸² Reublin and Maine, “What Were Coon Songs?”

“not too much” off-beat music and sung by “not too dark” voices, which might have sounded too dirty for the typical, mainly white theatergoers.¹⁸³ Thus, as much as belting originates in the shout of African-American religious services and imitated African-American blues and jazz, Broadway belting had developed to a unique singing style with its own sound, mainly created by white Broadway musical performers. The music for this new sound developed from ragtime coon songs, blues, and jazz, to Broadway’s unique musical style. Created on the so-called *Tin Pan Alley* – New York’s 28th street, which was the working place of the biggest music publishers and most famous songwriters – these songs entered history as the *Great American Songbook*. Sung by the most celebrated white and African-American jazz singers, these songs represent the origins of Broadway belting as a conglomeration of white and African-American singing styles at best.

Even though African-American performers were marginalized, discriminated against, and excluded, they had probably the most successful time during the Jazz Age of the 1920s. However, with segregation still alive, they had to enter and leave by the back door, even as late as the 1950s. As Sammy Davis Jr. recalled, “The second we stepped off the stage we were colored again. ... The other acts could gamble or sit in the lounge and have a drink, but we had to leave through the kitchen with the garbage.”¹⁸⁴ Despite the marginalization of African Americans, the influence of their musical traditions and singing habits on American music in general is evident and Broadway belting might even not exist without the coon songs, mocking and racist though they were. Nevertheless, Broadway belting is not just “singing with a black voice,” and it lost its imitating character through the music of new composers like Cole Porter, George Gershwin, Irving Berlin, and Jerome Kern.

¹⁸³ According to the Broadway League, “Broadway audiences historically have been overwhelmingly white.” In 2011, 83 percent of Broadway audiences were white people – the highest percentage since the industry began keeping numbers in 1998. See Arun Venugopal, “Micropolis: Why Broadway Audiences are Whiter than Ever,” *New York Public Radio*, no. May 25 (2012), <https://www.wnyc.org/story/211471-micropolis-why-broadway-audiences-are-whiter-ever/>.

¹⁸⁴ Barbara Land and Land Myrick, *A Short History of Las Vegas*, 2nd ed. (Reno, Nevada: University of Nevada Press, 2004). 145.

In summary, the origins of belting lie in the vernacular, but this does not mean that belting is solely a vocal expression developed from the working class. Broadway and the Bowery were always connected through the most crucial factors of the entertainment business: The audience and the money to be made with. From the beginning of American musical theatre, commercialization was a major factor and conglomerate entertainment was much more profitable than separating the genres. Class separation happened through the aesthetics of the audience, their dress code, manners, and language, but not through the form of entertainment itself. While nativists drove vernacular American musical theatre forward, a new middle class was the most promising audience to make money. Vernacular entertainment needed to become more pretentious, while operetta had to find a more entertaining character. Musical shows for this new middle class became a new form of conglomerate entertainment. Therefore, working-class performers, as much as classical singers, did not hesitate to cross social lines to follow their dreams of fame and fortune. Additionally, feminization brought a larger audience, and female performers became the main attraction in vaudeville.

Parallel to this evolution, the social status of African Americans slowly changed. After the Civil War and the end of slavery, freed African Americans searched for work and social integration. As uneducated former slaves, talented African Americans turned to show business as the best way to earn money. White performers and their middle-class audience searched for racial class separation, and the chosen way to uplift their social status was mockery. This mockery was, in fact, continuing racism, exercised on stage, and hailed by the audience, but in a legal way. However, talented African-American performers and their musical traditions influenced the portrayals of white performers so much, that American musical theatre developed into a new genre, *Broadway musical theatre*. Still segregated into “black” and “white” musicals,¹⁸⁵ white performers and audiences of Broadway musical theatre were dominant.¹⁸⁶ The origin of Broadway belting as its vocal expression is a

¹⁸⁵ Some early Broadway musical productions, for example *Showboat*, had African-American and white chorus singers, but strictly separated from each other on- and offstage.

¹⁸⁶ They still are dominant. I will come back to this aspect in a later chapter.

white phenomenon based on aesthetics, social order, and commercial success, even if deeply influenced by African-American musical traditions. Although white performers developed their belting style through imitation, they never intended to completely copy African-American singing. They just searched to “pick the cherry from the cake,” African-American rhythm, harmonics, and the jazz sound, and to integrate these musical elements into their own singing style and belt sound. This newly created belt sound is the subject of my next chapter.

2.2 The Belt Sound

The attempt to define or at least describe the belt sound is still in its early stages in the academic field of voice research. Besides physiological details about larynx position, frequency range, and other acoustical conditions, only the personal experience of professional belters can provide information to develop a definition. Descriptions consist of examples or references to situations in which belting is exercised and how the audience perceives belting. The belt sound is also a question of musical taste and the personal reception of the listener in a specific emotional mood, especially if the song’s content is highly emotional. Additionally, the listener’s perception depends on positive or negative experiences of listening to belt voices, personal musical education and knowledge, and a musical ear.

This chapter focuses on the discourse about belting. Several voice researchers, for example, Barbara Doscher and Jo Estill, describe the sound as *yelling* or *shouting*, James Mc Kinney as *loud* and *penetrating*. Henry J. Rubin interprets the sound as *brassy*, an expression often used to describe the belter herself.¹⁸⁷ Such scholars as Doscher, Rubin, and Robert T. Sataloff agree on the association of belting with the American musical theatre and thus, with *Broadway* belting.¹⁸⁸ However, independently of the musical genre in which belting is exercised (like in pop music, soul, rhythm & blues or musical theatre), analyzing the belt

¹⁸⁷ For example, the term “brassy lady” is extensively used to describe Ethel Merman. See chapter 3.1.1.

¹⁸⁸ Hollien and Miles, “Whither Belting?” 67.

sound needs to be, first of all, a physiological survey based on acoustics before performative factors and subjective observations are taking into account. Principally, belters, voice teachers, and voice researchers agree on certain specifications of belting: Belting is considered to be unusually loud with a heavy phonation, little or no vibrato ,and high-effort-level singing with sharp energy dropping in high frequencies.¹⁸⁹ The individual reception and taste might be different, but by concentrating on the physical facts, some common terms in the field of acoustics should help to find an adequate description of the belt sound. In the following chapters 2.2.1 to 2.2.4, I intend to put some principal terms of vocal analysis like sound, loudness, pitch, vocal beauty, and timbre into the context of belting to describe the sound quality of a belt sound, especially in comparison to a classically produced tone.

2.2.1 The Sound of a Voice

According to its general definition, a sound is “something that you can hear or that can be heard”¹⁹⁰ and “opposed to noise.”¹⁹¹ When it comes to music, the sound is “the particular quality of music that a musician or a group of musicians produce.”¹⁹² Contrary to the sound of a musical instrument, the *vocal* sound is produced by the human voice. Consequently, belting as a singing style produces a musical sound.

However, the description of a belt voice’s sound often implies terms that usually are connected to the speaking voice. When Estill calls belting “happy yelling set to music,”¹⁹³ and Susan Boardman speaks of “a tense, rough, driving, bright, vibrato-less, assertive yell,”¹⁹⁴ their statements are open to interpretation. Do these scholars perceive belting as yelling in the nature of a speech sound or as a sound produced by

¹⁸⁹ Ibid. 69.

¹⁹⁰ Cambridge Dictionary. 2014, s.v. “sound.” <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/de/worterbuch/englisch/sound>.

¹⁹¹ Oxford US-Dictionary. 2019, s.v. “sound.” <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/sound>.

¹⁹² s.v. “sound.”

¹⁹³ Estill Voice International, “History of Estill Voice Training,” accessed March 17, 2017. <https://www.estillvoice.com/pages/history>.

¹⁹⁴ Susan D. Boardman, *Voice Training for the Musical Theater Singer* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1987). 25.

the singing voice? What gives them the impression that the belt sound is, or at least contains, something *non-musical* that is produced by the speaking voice? The verb *to shout* is defined as “to speak with a very loud voice”¹⁹⁵ and “to express strong emotions,”¹⁹⁶ and *to yell* as “to shout loudly, usually because you are excited, angry, or in pain.”¹⁹⁷ Remembering the shout of African-American religious services as a form of *singing*, and the idea that *sound* is defined as opposite to *noise*, the distinction between the use of the speaking voice and the use of the singing voice when it comes to belting must be considered to be unclear. The perception of sound is based on sound qualities like loudness, duration, pitch, and timbre. Hence, it is essential to investigate these sound qualities in the context of belting to discover the principal characteristics of the belt sound.

2.2.2 The Loudness of the Singing Voice

Since in its original meaning, as in any academic or non-academic context, belting is a loud vocal expression to music and it is necessary to examine the *loudness* of a belt voice. In acoustics, the volume is the loudness perceived from the intensity of a sound wave.¹⁹⁸ The volume corresponds to the level the voice is sending out: The higher the sound intensity, the louder it sounds, thus the higher the volume is.¹⁹⁹ Consequently, a small voice singing loudly can be perceived as louder as a big voice singing softly. Nonetheless, if both voices are singing loudly, the big voice has a natural loudness a small voice has not. Producing a tone without a microphone or any other amplification on a professional stage, an instrument or a singing voice is perceived as loud if the audience can hear it at the farthest reach of a large room or theater, even while an unamplified orchestra is playing. Generally, an audience can

¹⁹⁵ Cambridge Dictionary. 2020, s.v. “shout.” <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/de/worterbuch/englisch/shout>.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Collins Dictionary. 2020, s.v. “yell.” <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/yell>.

¹⁹⁸ April Koch and Amanda Robb, “Pitch and Volume in Sound Waves,” accessed March 3, 2020, <https://study.com/academy/lesson/pitch-and-volume-in-sound-waves.html>.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

hear a classically-trained singing voice over an orchestra without amplification. However, only higher tones appear to be loud.²⁰⁰ In order to understand why it is necessary to explain some principles of acoustics.

Since in the context of music, a vocal sound “consists of singing,”²⁰¹ singing is making musical sounds with the voice. A musical sound is a “particular quality of music.”²⁰² Thus, singing consists necessarily of musical tones. The pitch of a musical tone is basically the auditory sensation of sound quality that makes it possible to perceive a tone in relation to the frequencies of a musical scale.²⁰³ For example, the tone produced by a tuning fork usually at the standard pitch of 440 Hertz, is called A above middle C according to the Helmholtz notation.²⁰⁴ If a voice or an instrument produces a musical sound at the same frequency, it plays the tone A. The frequency that defines the pitch of a tone is called *fundamental*.²⁰⁵ This fundamental frequency and its *overtones* – which are any frequencies greater than the fundamental – create together *partials*,²⁰⁶ and these partials create the *musical tone*.²⁰⁷ An orchestra produces complex sounds, namely compositions of partials. The loudest partial tone of an orchestra without amplification is about 450 Hz, independently of the orchestra’s size.²⁰⁸

Specific frequencies in the human vocal tract reinforcing the tone are called *formants*.²⁰⁹ Johan Sundberg recognized the importance of

²⁰⁰ When I had the privilege to visit Gaetano Donizetti’s opera *La Fille du Régiment* at the Metropolitan Opera, the voice of Luciano Pavarotti outshone every other first-class opera voice on stage. That is to say that exceptional loud voices exist, but the perception of loudness depends on much more psychoacoustical details. However, to dig necessarily much deeper into these acoustics would move too far away from the subject of this dissertation.

²⁰¹ See chapter 2.2.1.

²⁰² See chapter 2.2.1.

²⁰³ Christopher J. Plack et al., eds., *Pitch: Neural Coding and Perception* (New York: Springer Science & Business Media, 2005). 1.

²⁰⁴ Herrmann L.F. von Helmholtz, *On the Sensations of Tone* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007 (1885)). 11.

²⁰⁵ Sundberg, *The Science of the Singing Voice*. 19.

²⁰⁶ A musical tone is composed of different layers of frequencies, but the human ear hears primarily the fundamental. Exceptions can be experienced, for example, in so-called overtone singing.

²⁰⁷ Helmholtz, *On the Sensations of Tone*. 24–25.

²⁰⁸ Sundberg, *The Science of the Singing Voice*. 122.

²⁰⁹ Ibid. 12.

five frequency ranges in the singing voice, the formants F_1 to F_5 .²¹⁰ F_5 is called singer's formant.²¹¹ A singer is able to intensify a specific frequency range and, according to Sundberg, "the singer's formant improves the audibility of the voice without extra cost in vocal effort."²¹² This singer's formant is a resonance in singing frequencies between 2000 and 4000 Hertz, and most intensive in between 2800 Hertz for male voices and 3160 Hertz for female voices, thus around the human ear's most sensitive frequencies which lie at 3000 Hertz.²¹³ The formants and especially the singer's formant are responsible for a singing voice's *sustainability*, which defines if the voice can be heard or not, especially over an orchestra in a big theater.

According to Sundberg, "if the sound level of an orchestra is considerably higher than that of the voice, the voice is likely to be completely masked."²¹⁴ However, Sundberg also states that "on the average, the masking effect of the sound of an orchestra will be greatest at 400–500 Hertz and will decrease toward higher and lower frequencies."²¹⁵ Thus, a voice able to reinforce its formants with frequencies above 500 Hertz, and especially the singer's formant, can be perceived in the far corner of a theater while the whole orchestra is playing, and needs to be considered as "loud."

To summarize this excursion into acoustics, I would argue that, *independently of the exercised vocal style*, any voice producing *musical tones* with a fundamental frequency above 500 Hertz, can be perceived as "loud." As Sundberg confirms, "if a singer produces a fundamental frequency above 500 Hertz, the singer creates a strong musical tone."²¹⁶ The most impressive belt tones of any female belt voice in American musi-

²¹⁰ Robert T. Sataloff, "Die menschliche Stimme," *Spektrum der Wissenschaft*, no. 11 (1993): <https://www.spektrum.de/magazin/die-menschliche-stimme/821199>.

²¹¹ Sundberg, *The Science of the Singing Voice*. 118.

²¹² Ibid. 123.

²¹³ Johan Sundberg, "Formant Frequencies in Male Opera Singers" in *The Science of the Singing Voice*, 1st Edition, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1987, 5. Articulation, 119.

²¹⁴ Johan Sundberg cit. in Diana Deutsch, ed. *The Psychology of Music* (San Diego: Academic Press, 1999). 178.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

cal theatre lie on or above the tone B above middle C²¹⁷; thus, above 500 Hertz. Scholars like Miles and Hollien describe a belt voice that can be heard over an orchestra as *unusually loud*.²¹⁸ However, a classically-trained voice that can be heard throughout a theater is generally not perceived as *especially* loud, but rather as “not difficult to hear.”²¹⁹ The reason for this aesthetic distinction is that the tone production of a belt voice is generally not acknowledged to be the result of a singing voice. Many scholars define belting as “singing with the speaking voice.” Jacqueline Ruhl, for example, notes that there is “only a minimal difference between yelling and belting,”²²⁰ while Conrad L. Osborne implies that “most belters could not be heard in a ‘large house’ without amplification.”²²¹ Since the formant frequencies of normal speech for a typical adult male voice lie between 85 to 180 Hertz and those of a female voice lie between 165 to 255 Hertz,²²² normal speech cannot be heard over an orchestra.²²³ (Of course, normal speech is not comparable to melodramatic speech sound which follows different acoustical principles.) Thus, if the sound of a belt voice were a normal speech sound, only a classically-trained voice could be heard over an orchestra. Since belt voices can be heard over an orchestra, belting needs to be considered as singing.

As mentioned, the perception of a singing voice depends on the voice’s formant frequencies. Thus, belting as a singing style needs the singer’s formant to be part of its formant frequencies in favor of its audibility. In contrast, if belting were the expression of the speaking voice, the spectrum of a belt tone’s formant frequencies would not show a

217 As is the case for the most celebrated female belt songs of Broadway musical repertoire.

218 Hollien and Miles, “Whither Belting?” 69.

219 According to Sundberg, “Female opera singers are generally not difficult to hear when they sing at high pitches, even when the orchestra accompaniment is loud.” See Deutsch, *The Psychology of Music*, 178.

220 Hollien and Miles, “Whither Belting?” 65.

221 Ibid. I would be interested how Osborne explains that *many* belt voices were successful before amplification in theaters became common if *most* could not be heard.

222 Ronald J. Baken, *Clinical Measurement of Speech and Voice* (London: Taylor & Francis Ltd., 1987), 177.

223 The needed subglottic pressure is achieved differently in normal speech than in singing. See Sundberg, *The Science of the Singing Voice*, 48.

singer's formant. In my study *Comparing Sounds of the Singing Voice*,²²⁴ I analyzed three different qualities of some selected tones: those produced as belted, as classically sung tones, and as "sung" with the speaking voice. For this, I worked with the software Praat, designed and in continuous development by Paul Boersma and David Weenink of the University of Amsterdam and used for speech analysis in phonetics.²²⁵ According to Boersma, Praat enables its user to record a sound and to look "inside" it.²²⁶ The visible representation of the sound presents the spectrogram (the amount of high and low frequencies in the signal), the pitch contour (the frequency of periodicity), and formant contours.²²⁷ The results of my study achieved with Praat clearly demonstrate that the frequency spectrum of a belt tone is much closer to that of the classically sung tone than to that of a tone produced with the speaking voice.²²⁸ While even in the highest tone produced with the speaking voice no singer's formant is present, it is clearly present in the classical *and* the belt tones.²²⁹ The statement of Wendy D. LeBorgne, that "elite belters presented with clustering energy around 4000 Hz,"²³⁰ meaning that a belt voice produces the singer's formant, supports my results. On the contrary, as my study reveals, the tones produced by a speaking voice normally do not contain the singer's formant. Thus, the highest tone produced with the speaking voice corresponds to yelling or screaming, as the recording demonstrates, but not the belt tone.²³¹ Thus, contrary to Miles and Hollien on her supposed conclusion about the descriptions of Lawrence, Estill, and Raymond H. Colton that "seem to indicate that belting is an exaggerated use of the speaking voice or the modal regis-

²²⁴ Christin Bonin. "Comparing Sounds of the Singing Voice." Presented at the 1st Conference on Computer Simulation of Musical Creativity, University of Huddersfield, June 17–19, 2016, (unpublished).

²²⁵ Paul Boersma and David Weenink, "Praat: Doing Phonetics by Computer," accessed March 2, 2020. <http://www.fon.hum.uva.nl/praat/>.

²²⁶ Paul Boersma and Vincent Van Heuven, "Speak and unSpeak with Praat," *Glot International*, no. November/December (2001), http://www.fon.hum.uva.nl/paul/papers/speakUnspeakPraat_glot2001.pdf. 341.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Bonin, "Comparing Sounds of the Singing Voice."

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Wendy D LeBorgne and Marci Rosenberg, *The Vocal Athlete* (San Diego: Plural Publishing, 2014). 96.

²³¹ Bonin, "Comparing Sounds of the Singing Voice." 4.

ter,”²³² belting is singing. Sundberg confirms, that “the long-term average spectrum of normal speech is similar to that of the orchestra” and “the combination of the sound of an orchestra with that of the human voice during normal speech is probably the most unfortunate one possible.”²³³ Consequently, the belt sound *cannot* be produced by the speaking voice. It would not be loud enough to be heard over the orchestra. The misunderstanding of belt sound as a speech sound provokes the comparison of belting to yelling, screaming, and shouting. Miles and Hollien refer to the Voice Foundation, which associates belting with “chest voice,” “yelling,” or “forcing.”²³⁴ Comparable opinions and perceptions could be cited, but the interesting question is – if an audience perceives a belt voice sound as yelling and screaming – what creates the *impression* that belting is a speech sound, even if this is physically not correct? The belt sound produced by an elite Broadway belter is generally perceived as singing. Most of the time, the audience perceives a belt sound like singing if the belt sound harmonizes with the music. If this is not the case, any belt sound is *really* comparable to yelling or screaming. Consequently, the sound quality of a belt tone depends on the right pitch as the perceived auditory sensation. Thus, the next chapter concentrates on the pitch of the singing voice and vocal beauty.

2.2.3 Pitch and Vocal Beauty – “Good” and “Bad” Singing

Except for examples like *a capella* singing, an audience encounters a singing voice chiefly when it is accompanied by one or more musical instruments. Since the pitch of a perceived tone is an auditory sensation in which the listener puts the tone in relation to the frequencies of a musical scale,²³⁵ the pitch of any produced tone needs to be in accordance with the pitch of a musical instrument or an orchestra. If the singer misses the right pitch and sings out of tune, the tone sounds

232 Hollien and Miles, “Whither Belting?” 65.

233 Johan Sundberg cit. in Deutsch, *The Psychology of Music*. 178.

234 Hollien and Miles, “Whither Belting?” 66.

235 Plack et al., *Pitch: Neural Coding and Perception*. 1.

“wrong” and “ugly.”²³⁶ Depending on the listener’s musical ear and sensitivity, even an exceedingly small difference can be perceived as “bad singing.” Independently of musical style and genre, screaming and yelling to music is perceived as vocal ugliness. Although the listener may perceive vocal ugliness more often in genres like blues, jazz, and rock music,²³⁷ vocal ugliness nevertheless exists also in classical music. One of my preferred examples for demonstration is the voice of Florence Foster Jenkins. In 1941, at the age of 73, Jenkins made recordings at the Meltone Studios in New York: Her recording of Mozart’s aria “Der Hölle Rache” from *The Magic Flute*,²³⁸ especially gained public attention, when the TIME Magazine critic described her singing as “innocently uproarious to hear” and her staccato notes as sounding “like a cuckoo in its cups.”²³⁹ Although she had a classically-trained voice, she apparently was lacking musical talent and sang notably completely out of tune. Sundberg calls her singing a “classic example of vocal ugliness.”²⁴⁰ Thus a voice, supposedly classically trained, but out of tune, is simply considered ugly. Whereas if a belt voice does not harmonize with the music, if it sounds out of tune, the audience will generally perceive the sound also as ugly, but, more specifically, may perceive the singer to be yelling or screaming. Consequently, the interpretation of the ugliness of a belt voice depends on the *combination* of loudness and pitch: A belt voice sounding out of tune is not considered singing, but yelling or screaming, due to the natural loudness that defines the voice as a belt voice. A classical voice does not necessarily sound loud, but it surely sounds ugly if it is out-of-tune. Thus, at this point of my analysis, the belt voice

²³⁶ For more information on “vocal ugliness” See Johan Sundberg, “The KTH Synthesis of Singing,” *Advances in Cognitive Psychology* 2, no. 2–3 (2006), 137.

²³⁷ Since in these genres many performers sing (even professionally) without vocal technique to avoid a classical vocal sound, the perception of vocal ugliness is more frequent than in classical music.

²³⁸ Florence Foster Jenkins – Queen of the Night by Mozart, posted by “guera3001,” March 18, 2010. (YouTube: Google LLC), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V6ubiUIxbWE>.

²³⁹ Nicolas Martin, “Florence Foster Jenkins (2016),” accessed March, 25, 2019. <http://www.historyvhollywood.com/reelfaces/florence-foster-jenkins/>.

²⁴⁰ Sundberg, “The KTH Synthesis of Singing,” 137.

needs to be defined at a basic level as a naturally loud²⁴¹ singing voice, one that is only comparable to yelling or screaming if it is out of tune.

The more frequent perception of a belter to be yelling than that of a classical singer lies in the connection of the vocal sound to the music. As mentioned before, the musical tone is composed of *partial tones*. *Harmonic partials*, also called *harmonics*, are partial tones that are composed of the fundamental frequency and frequencies, which in turn are *precise numeric multiples* of the fundamental.²⁴² Thus, the nearer the formants F_1 to F_5 of a vocally produced tone are to these harmonics, the better is the physical quality of the produced tone, its sustainability, and, consequently, its sound quality and vocal beauty. In this context, vocal beauty does not mean the subjective perception of the tone, but its approach to physical perfection.

A personal experiment I use as a voice teacher will help to explain the importance of harmonics for singing on the right pitch: First, I choose a simple chord, for example, F major. I play the corresponding keys on a piano above middle C, while playing the note F one octave higher. My student is asked to concentrate to listen to the sound of this tone. Then, I choose other chords which contain the tone F, for example, D minor and D-flat major, and play the corresponding keys above middle C while still playing the note F one octave higher, asking my student to describe the sound of this tone. Any listener who is not tone-deaf will perceive the tone F as higher, lower, darker, or brighter, depending on the chord played below. The varying harmonics of the different chords are responsible for this result. This is not only another indication of how crucial it is to have a musical ear to sing in tune, but it also confirms the importance of the harmonic connection between the music played and the note sung. Hence, if any singer is processing this so-called *formant tuning* in the best way, the vocal production appears as singing on the right pitch.

²⁴¹ Just to remember: The perception of loudness is subjective. It depends on the loudness of phonation, which basically refers to vocal fold vibrations, rather than its objective sound pressure level. See *The Science of the Singing Voice*. 35, 9.

²⁴² Helmholtz, *On the Sensations of Tone*. 24

Although format tuning is “by no means specific to the classical style of singing,”²⁴³ it explains why a classically-trained voice that is out of tune still can be perceived as a singing voice: Harm K. Schutte, Donald G. Miller, and Jan G. Svec describe formant tuning as adjusting “the articulation of the vocal tract to enhance acoustic output.”²⁴⁴ Sundberg states that the singer’s formant comes into existence by the *melting* of the third, the fourth, and the fifth formant when the frequency separation between these formants is smaller in the sung vowels.²⁴⁵ In other words, when a singer adopts formant tuning, he or she adjusts the *vowel* on the tone to provoke this melting and to produce the singer’s formant. This explains why a sung “me” sounds sometimes like “meah.” As the audience knows the word “me,” listeners do not pay attention to this tuning if they like the musical sound and the tone is on the right pitch. However, even if the singer does not produce the fundamental on the right pitch (and thus sings out of tune), the singer’s formant (the melted formants F_3 - F_5) still exists. This explains why a classically-trained, but out-of-tune voice still sounds like a singing voice.

Tracy Bourne and Dianna Kerry state that “acoustically, the belt sound demonstrates higher energy in the upper frequencies of the sound spectrum,” “a high first formant frequency (F_1) compared with classical singing,” and a possible tuning of F_1 to the second harmonic on some vowels.²⁴⁶ If Bourne and Kerry are correct, they confirm Sundberg’s theory of melting formants and support my argument that belting is singing. Bourne and Kerry’s second point, “a high first formant frequency (F_1) compared with classical singing,” supports my study’s results that the belt sound presents more energy on the lower formants F_1 and F_2 than a classically sung tone. Due to this high frequency of the first formant, the belt sound *resembles* a speech sound more than the sound of a singing voice. The formant structure of a belted tone presents

²⁴³ Sundberg and Thalén, “Respiratory and Acoustical Differences Between Belt and Neutral Style of Singing.” 424.

²⁴⁴ Harm K. Schutte and Donald G. Miller, “Belting and Pop, Nonclassical Approaches to the Female Middle Voice: Some Preliminary Considerations,” *ibid.* 7, no. 2 (1993). 290.

²⁴⁵ Sundberg, *The Science of the Singing Voice*. 119.

²⁴⁶ Tracy Bourne and Dianna Kerry, “Vocal Qualities in Music Theater Voice: Perceptions of Expert Pedagogues,” *Journal of Voice* 30, no. 1 (2016). 128e2.

less melting in F_3 - F_5 than that of a classical tone. Since F_5 is the singer's formant, belting *can* sound like yelling, if the concentration of energy in a belted tone lies *too much* in the lower formants and the belter is not able to produce a singer's formant.²⁴⁷ A classical voice rarely sounds like yelling, since the vocal sound of a classically-trained voice always produces a singer's formant (even if, as mentioned, the tone result might be on the wrong pitch).

Thomas Millhouse and Frantz Clermont have demonstrated “the concept that the singer’s formant is a phenomenon not just of acoustics, but also of human perception.”²⁴⁸ Thus, any voice producing musical tones on the right pitch in the best possible connection to the music can be perceived as beautiful, whether classically trained or specialized in belting. Although Sundberg states that all formants F_1 to F_5 are significant for a voice’s timbre, he emphasizes that the two lowest formants (F_1 , F_2) determine most of the vowel color.²⁴⁹ Consequently, the high energy level in lower frequencies of a belt voice determines most of the vowel color of a belt voice and the perception of belt sound depends not only on loudness and pitch but also on timbre, which is the subject of the next chapter.

2.2.4 Timbre – Sound Quality in Belting and Classical Singing

Timbre is the perceived, individual sound quality of a voice or instrument and describes the characteristics of sound helping the human ear to distinguish sounds with the same pitch and loudness.²⁵⁰ For example, a voice producing the tone A can be recognized as such if compared to an instrument producing the same tone. Additionally, a singer’s voice with a specific timbre can easily be recognized, even when listening

²⁴⁷ I will give an example for such a case in chapter 2.2.4.

²⁴⁸ Thomas J. Millhouse and Frantz Clermont. “Perceptual Characterisation of the Singer’s Formant Region: A Preliminary Study.” Presented at the 11th Australian International Conference on Speech Science & Technology, University of Auckland, New Zealand, December 6–8, 2006. 258.

²⁴⁹ Sundberg, *The Science of the Singing Voice*. 12.

²⁵⁰ Carl Rod Nave, “Timbre,” accessed March 3, 2020. <http://hyperphysics.phy-astr.gsu.edu/hbase/Sound/timbre.html>.

to the singer voicing another song. Although this concerns any voice, independently of its exercised singing style, I would argue that a belt voice is significantly easier to recognize than a classical voice. The classical singer trains hard to find the right formant tuning, to produce a balanced vibrato, and to sing in the mode of *voix mixte*. *Voix mixte* is the established term in voice teaching for the melting of all voice registers.²⁵¹ To learn how to sing with *voix mixte*, the use of *messe di voce* technique is one of the most critical skills to learn if a classical singer is to accomplish a uniform timbre throughout the vocal range. *Messa di voce* concerns not only *crescendo* and *decrescendo* of one tone but a singing line without “breaks.”²⁵² Such breaks are *passaggio* problems, which means that the transition between vocal registers (*passaggio*) does not happen smoothly and can be more or less easily perceived by an attentive listener. A “breaking voice” generally disturbs the listener and is considered as a “bad vocal habit” or a “lack of vocal technique.”²⁵³ In contrast, approaching the perfect tone production according to acoustical laws as closely as possible produces the uniformity of the classically-trained voice.

The physiological differences in vocal instruments define the personal timbre of a voice in the sense of overall sound quality. As Sundberg states, “vowel quality and voice color ultimately depend on the shape of the vocal tract.”²⁵⁴ Thus, basically, it is the instrument a singer is born with, which makes a voice interesting and recognizable, independently of the exercised vocal style. Although a classically-trained voice using *voix mixte* still keeps its timbre, it is much less recognizable versus another classical voice of the same register, than would be two belt voices. For example, comparing the part of an aria sung by a soprano to the same part sung by other sopranos at a comparable artis-

²⁵¹ Frederic Husler and Yvonne Rodd-Marling, *Singen – Die physische Natur des Stimmorgans – Anleitung zur Ausbildung der Singstimme* (Mainz: Schott Musik International, 1965). 93.

²⁵² Ibid. 116.

²⁵³ Exceptions: In pop music culture, some singers have cultivated these breaks into special effects of their voice.

²⁵⁴ Sundberg, *The Science of the Singing Voice*. 20.

tic level, the recognizable difference of timbre is small.²⁵⁵ In contrast, to the listener of different versions of the same belt song sung by different female belters, the perception of timbre can vary significantly.²⁵⁶

It is the primary goal of a belter to avoid uniformity and to keep its individual sound, not to reach the *voix mixte*. Vocal technique for a belt voice serves primarily to extend the belt voice's range and strength and allows the performer to sing on the right pitch. Naturally, a desirable side effect is to keep the voice as healthy as possible. The development of the belt voice depends on the natural timbre of the voice. However, when a student begins classical voice training, the timbre of the first notes sung (generally tones near the speaking voice frequencies for pedagogical reasons) defines the voice category like soprano, mezzo-soprano, or alto.²⁵⁷ Then, the student receives instructions on how to reach a physically correct tone production and to sing with *voix mixte* through all of the voice's registers. The voice is trained to maintain the sound of this optimal tone production over its complete range. Although the original timbre of the classical voice does still exist, it becomes *adjusted* in favor of the physically most effective musical tones throughout the voice's range.

On the contrary, the belter uses the timbre of the loudest tone to define the individual belt sound. However, besides the size of the vocal tract, as mentioned by Sundberg, and the voice's natural timbre – the belt sound develops essentially through musical talent: Although every singer of any vocal style needs musical talent and a musical ear to sing properly, the belter also needs to remain true to the voice's natural timbre while extending the voice's loudness and range and keeping the right pitch. Thus, the belter uses the timbre to define the individual

²⁵⁵ For example, listen to Who Sang The 'Queen of The Night' Staccatos The Best? (F6), posted by "Mister Golightly," April 26, 2017. (YouTube: Google LLC), 6:46, <https://youtu.be/KNYWS1PNCH8>.

²⁵⁶ For example, listen to Who Sang The 'A New Argentina' High Notes The Best? (E5-G5), posted by "Mister Golightly," November 19, 2017. (YouTube: Google LLC), 9:22, <https://youtu.be/rbdRoeqRynM.2020>.

²⁵⁷ A voice's timbre at speech level can be different from the timbre of the same voice when classically singing. For example, students have come to me as a supposed mezzo soprano but their voice developed into a soprano voice. However, this aspect needs to be the subject of another research project.

belt sound and to develop loudness and range of the voice, while the classical singer follows the rules of vocal technique to create physically correct built musical tones throughout the voice's range. This aspect is crucial for understanding at what point a belt voice depends upon the singer's idiosyncratic voice.

At first glance, the categorizations of female classically-trained voices and female belt voices correspond to each other: Soprano, mezzo-soprano, and alto for classical voices and high-belt, mix-belt (or mezzo-belt), and low-belt for belt voices.²⁵⁸ However, contrary to the ideal of *voix mixte* for classical voices and assuming the ability to sing on the right pitch, it is the combination of natural loudness and timbre that defines the belt sound. Remembering that loudness and pitch are responsible for the ability to define belting as singing and not yelling or screaming, the combination of natural loudness and timbre therefore distinguishes the singing style of belting from classical singing.

For example, the voice of a singer who can easily produce the voice's loudest tone in a lower register needs to be identified as a *low-belt voice*. Assuming this loudest tone is produced naturally without the singer suffering vocally (through a hurting throat or being out of tune), the belt voice can now be developed below and above this tone in the limits of the voice's natural range.²⁵⁹ This range (usually about one octave) may possibly be extended slightly through training, up to one octave and a half, but a low-belt voice will never reach the usual range of two-and-a-half or three octaves of a classically-trained voice.²⁶⁰

The same principles are valid for a *high-belt voice* on high tones. A natural high-belter concentrates on high tones with sharp energy and little vibrato. While a high-belter can easily give notes above the high C a "laser-like" character, she avoids notes below E above middle C, which means around female speaking voice frequencies.²⁶¹ The voice

²⁵⁸ During the development of my pedagogical approach to belting as a voice teacher, I used the terms *high-belt*, *mix-belt*, and *low-belt* to connect the voice color of belters to the belt voice's range. See Christin Bonin, *Belt Voice Training – Singing With a Belting Voice* (Munich: Smu Verlag, 2009). 31, 38, 41.

²⁵⁹ This is meant to define the center tone of a belt voice's range, not to be a teaching or learning advice.

²⁶⁰ Bonin, *Belt Voice Training – Singing With a Belting Voice*. 38–41.

²⁶¹ If the high-belter cannot avoid such notes, she generally depends on amplification.

sounds clear and head-voice-dominant, with little or no vibrato in the lower and middle register, and the singer concentrates on giving energy to notes between B above middle C and E or F above the high C. The belted tones are loud and powerful, precise, crystal-clear, and ear-piercing. The range of a high-belter is about one octave and a third, generally between E above middle C, up to E or F, sometimes G, one octave higher.²⁶²

Nevertheless, the much sought-after belt voice for Broadway musical theatre and popular music in general, which is also the most difficult to achieve, is the *mix-belt voice*. The singer predestinated to be a mix-belt can produce strong tones in the lower part and the higher part of the voice's range, but the change from the darker voice color to a brighter voice color is delicate.²⁶³ Contrary to a classical singer, the mix-belt does not try to adjust the voice's timbre to reach a *voix mixte* throughout the whole range. The mix-belt keeps the naturally loud tones loud, and trains to be able to change discretely from the lower range to the higher range. Instead of balancing the voice through color adjustments, the belter moves from one extreme to the other. The best mix-belters are able to avoid technically difficult vocal tones, for example through song transpositions, or by using vocal effects to mask the sound difference between the lower part of the voice's range and the voice range's high-belt zone.²⁶⁴ Each of these belt voices keeps its own natural timbre – at least this is the case for elite belters – and that makes each voice *unique*.

According to LeBorgne, “it is often the unique voice that gets hired”²⁶⁵; this contention supports my argument that the combination of timbre and loudness is responsible for a belter’s unique voice. For example, as a low-belt voice, Ethel Merman’s unique belt sound is a considerable example. Merman made her Broadway debut in 1930 at the age of 21 in the featured part of Kate Fothergill in *Girl Crazy* by George Gershwin. She belted out “I Got Rhythm” and, as a recording

²⁶² Bonin, *Belt Voice Training – Singing With a Belting Voice*. 31–35.

²⁶³ I analyzed the mix-belt voice in detail in my pedagogical work. See *ibid.* 41–48.

²⁶⁴ I call these effects *transition tricks*. I have examined the mix-belt voices of Beyoncé and Christina Aguilera on this subject in detail. See *ibid.* 48–53, 56–58.

²⁶⁵ LeBorgne, “Perceptual Findings on the Broadway Belt Voice.” 685.

from a benefit concert in 1931²⁶⁶ demonstrates, her voice had a precise placement and focus, which allowed her to sing on the right pitch and keeping loudness and timbre throughout a whole song.

Contrary to classical arias, which often exceed a range of over two octaves, musical-theatre songs mostly cover a range of only one octave to one-and-a-half octaves.²⁶⁷ The range of “I Got Rhythm” is within an octave and a semitone from B below middle C and C above middle C. Listening to recordings of Merman’s repertoire, I discovered that she kept her unique voice nearly exclusively within this vocal range during her entire career. For example, in “Let Me Call You Sweetheart,” which she sang in 1932 for Fleischer Studios’ Screen Songs to a cartoon featuring Betty Boop,²⁶⁸ she sings this slow ballad with the same vocal quality. The song’s range corresponds to that of “*I Got Rhythm*,” extending from the middle C to D-flat, a ninth above the middle C. In “After I’ve Gone,”²⁶⁹ from the 1931 Paramount Motion Picture *Be Like Me*, she sings in about the same range from B below middle C to a high D, a ninth above middle C, and keeps her unique belt sound throughout the song. Exceptionally, she sings some phrases in this recording with a soft vocal expression, using more head voice register in her diminuendo passage, before she breaks again into song, belting out loud until the end of the song. Although she assured biographers that she never had a vocal lesson in her life,²⁷⁰ she nevertheless knew precisely in which range she could keep the loudness and timbre of her voice by giving the maximum belt sound quality. Later recordings like “Blow, Gabriel, Blow” (1936)²⁷¹ from *Anything Goes* (1934), in a range between A below middle C to D a ninth above middle C; and “You Can’t Get a Man with a Gun”

²⁶⁶ Merman Footage 1931, posted by “Yellow42758,” December 5, 2012. (YouTube: Google LLC), 0:20, <https://youtu.be/1vq7D9WtNUM>.

²⁶⁷ For example, the part of Elphaba is an exception. However, this is a part for a mix-belt voice as I will explain further in this chapter.

²⁶⁸ “Fleischer Screen Songs – Let Me Call You Sweetheart (1932),” posted by “Humanivideo,” June 23, 2017. (YouTube: Google LLC), 8:22, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sH5FE3tVfbI>.

²⁶⁹ Ethel Merman – After I’ve Gone 1931, posted by “preservationhallo1,” March 31, 2009. (YouTube: Google LLC), 3:14, <https://youtu.be/ebSvhYTBAwI>; *ibid*.

²⁷⁰ Merman and Eells, *Merman*, 41.

²⁷¹ Anything Goes – Blow Gabriel Blow – Ethel Merman, posted by “BroadwayJLM,” February 19, 2011. (YouTube: Google LLC), 3:41, https://youtu.be/KmhC_M93bLA.

(1946)²⁷² and “Doin’ What Comes Naturally” (1980)²⁷³ from *Annie Get Your Gun* (1946), both in the same range as “I Got Rhythm,” confirm my argument, that a low-belt voice has to remain in a range of an octave to an octave-and-a-half to keep the low-belt sound. Throughout her career, Merman was known always to sing on the right pitch, belting out *very* loud and keeping her unique belt sound.²⁷⁴ In her later career, Merman adjusted her range slightly downwards. She sang “You’re the Top” with Bing Crosby in 1956 in a range from G below middle C and C above middle C.²⁷⁵ At the age of 67, in a 1975 television program at Nashville Opry Land, she performed “You Can’t Get a Man with a Gun” two semitones lower than in 1946, between A-flat below middle C and B-flat below the high C.²⁷⁶ Since amplification in Broadway musical theatre came slowly into general use from the 1957 musical *West Side Story* on, Merman sang most of her Broadway career live without amplification. Obviously, her belt voice was loud enough to be heard over an orchestra. Consequently, the low-belt sound needs to be seen as the original sound of the Broadway Belt.

However, from the 1950s on, the changing aesthetics in Broadway musical theatre and the soon-to-be-established amplification offered high belt voices new possibilities. The Original Broadway Cast Recording of *I Can Get It for You Wholesale*, with 19-year-old Barbra Streisand’s rendition of “Miss Marmelstein” (1962),²⁷⁷ followed by her interpretations of “People”²⁷⁸ and “Don’t Rain on My Parade”²⁷⁹ from the musical

272 You Can’t Get a Man With a Gun – Ethel Merman, posted by “Al B.’s Music,” May 18, 2012. (YouTube: Google LLC), 3:11, <https://youtu.be/EslXq-OzmoM>.

273 Ethel Merman in Nashville Country, 1980 TV – Doin’ What Comes Natur’lly, posted by “Alan Eichler,” November 23, 2018. (YouTube: Google LLC), 4:38 (starting at 1:29), <https://youtu.be/cvREHRGmnUc?t=89>.

274 Further details about Merman’s unique voice will follow in the next chapters.

275 Ethel Merman and Bing Crosby Sing ‘You’re the Top’, posted by “mitchellivers,” February 15, 2011. (YouTube: Google LLC), 3:06, <https://youtu.be/LCfqIXiLxSE>.

276 Ethel Merman at Nashville Opryland – You Can’t Get a Man With a Gun, 1975 TV, posted by “Alan Eichler,” November 3, 2015. (YouTube: Google LLC), 10:24, <https://youtu.be/4kU8uC-aE3g>.

277 Miss Marmelstein, posted by “Barbra Streisand,” November 8, 2014. (YouTube: Google LLC), 3:20, <https://youtu.be/tKRV5Xlxl7o>.

278 ‘People’ from Funny Girl, posted by “Courtney Fry,” July 25, 2007. (YouTube: Google LLC), 5:00, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9-8gn6vGu_w.

279 ‘Don’t Rain On My Parade’ Barbra Streisand – Funny Girl, posted by “IJustLoveYou-Barbra,” January 30, 2012. (YouTube: Google LLC), 2:44, <https://youtu.be/2QNP-eefafI>.

Funny Girl (1964), demonstrate the sound qualities of a high-belt voice. Thanks to amplification, Streisand does not need to force any tone in order to create a fuller sound and is able to sing with a relaxed voice in the lower and middle parts of her vocal range. However, Streisand's high-belt tones are of such exceptional perseverance and clarity, that this unique high-belt sound became responsible for her career to follow. As Whitney Balliett wrote, "Streisand wows her listeners with her shrewd dynamics (in-your-ear soft here, elbowing-loud there), her bravura climbs, her rolling vibrato, and the singular Streisand-from-Brooklyn nasal quality of her voice – a voice as immediately recognizable in its way as Louis Armstrong's."²⁸⁰ After these two Broadway musicals and the revival of *Funny Girl* in London's West End in 1966, Streisand became a movie actress and recording artist and did not return to Broadway musical theatre. Although her voice is unique and idolized by many vocal artists to follow, the high-belt sound remains an exceptional belt variety in Broadway musical theatre and, when it appears, often does so as an extraordinary ability of a classically-trained high soprano voice, as it is the case for Kristin Chenoweth.²⁸¹ The same year Streisand appeared in *Funny Girl* in London's West End, Merman portrayed Annie Oakley in Irving Berlin's *Annie Get Your Gun* on Broadway.²⁸² Since Merman remained one of the biggest Broadway stars for over a decade to follow, the low-belt sound remained the principal Broadway belt sound, while the high-belt sound entered the pop music charts and the recording industry.²⁸³ However, the continually changing aesthetics in Broadway musical theatre brought new, demanding parts for belters. While parts like Sally Bowles in *Cabaret* and Grizabella in *Cats* require mostly the sound of a low-belt voice, the range of these parts is extended to E-flat and E above the high C. This extension of range brought the necessity to combine the high-belt sound and the low-belt sound, and,

²⁸⁰ Whitney Balliett, "Barbra Streisand," *The New Yorker*, no. June 20 (1994): <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1994/06/20/barbra-streisand>.

²⁸¹ This confirms one of my pedagogical principles, that belting and classical singing do not exclude each other, which is the subject of the next chapter.

²⁸² The Broadway League, "Annie Get Your Gun," accessed March 4, 2020. <https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-production/annie-get-your-gun-3283>.

²⁸³ Streisand won her first Grammy for the Album of the Year as early as 1963 for *The Barbra Streisand Album*.

subsequently, the invention of body microphones allowed the sound of the mix-belt voice to flourish.²⁸⁴

Belting in the lower *and* in the upper part of the female vocal range is a necessity for roles like Elphaba in *Wicked*. Idina Menzel sings “Defying Gravity” with an optimized mix-belt sound and keeps her timbre throughout the song’s range of nearly two octaves (between G below middle C and G-flat above high C). Her high-belt tones do not sound as laser-sharp as Streisand’s, and her low-belt tones are not comparable to Merman’s, but she offers a unique overall sound quality to the audience. However, what happens when she forces her voice by singing too loud and darkening her voice color, especially in her *passaggio*,²⁸⁵ can be heard in “Let it Goat vs let it Go: Idina Menzel New Year’s Eve 2014 vs Now” on YouTube.²⁸⁶ Her best vocals are powerful and precise, but when she misses the right pitch, her voice strays into yelling – or even roaring – while she tries to keep up the belt sound.²⁸⁷ These recordings confirm my argument that belting exercised on the wrong pitch can sound like yelling or screaming while belting on the right pitch confirms the belt sound’s quality as the sound of a singing voice. It also supports the argument that keeping the loudness and timbre of the belt sound can come at a price: Menzel risks damaging her voice by trying to keep the full sound of a low-belt voice also in the high part of her vocal range, be it consciously or accidentally.²⁸⁸ Nevertheless, when Menzel belts out with her unique timbre and reaches the right pitch, her renditions are highly recognized, even if the belt sound in general, and especially the mix-belt sound, is considered *vocal abuse* by many scholars, phoniatricians, and voice teachers. Miles and Hollien ask the question if belting is hazardous, and present some professional opinions like

²⁸⁴ More information on amplification will follow in the next chapter.

²⁸⁵ For further information about a mix-belt’s forcing in the *passaggio*, see Bonin, *Belt Voice Training – Singing With a Belting Voice*, 41–45.

²⁸⁶ Let It Goat vs Let It Go: Idina Menzel New Year’s Eve 2014 vs Now, posted by “Broadway Sorta Person,” December 31, 2018. (YouTube: Google LLC), 6:13, <https://youtu.be/3x45eLdckIs?t=320>.

²⁸⁷ This is an example for too much energy in the lower formants, as mentioned in chapter 2.2.3.

²⁸⁸ Technically, she forces her voice, while Merman and Streisand, keeping their voices in a convenient range for their belt sounds, do not so.

Richard Miller's: "to belt is to use the vocal instrument in a pathological way,"²⁸⁹ or Wilbur James Gould's that "when belting is used by individuals untrained in these techniques, vocal abuse very well may result."²⁹⁰ On the contrary, Jay Wilkey relates a good belt voice to "extraordinary talent, vocal strength"²⁹¹ and "an unusually strong vocal apparatus,"²⁹² while James C. McKinney observes that "some voices seem to be almost indestructible"²⁹³ and "there are right and wrong ways to belt."²⁹⁴ These comments indicate that the belt sound is widely misunderstood: belting in and of itself is not vocal abuse; it is all about the correct execution.

In summary, this exploration demonstrates that the belt sound is the sound of a singing voice. Assuming singing on the right pitch, the belt sound develops from the natural loudness and natural timbre of a voice. The register in which a voice can produce its loudest tone defines the voice as mainly being a low-belt or a high-belt voice. To extend the natural belt voice range of a high-belt or a low-belt voice to become a mix-belt voice demands a very carefully exercised belting style since a belt voice's timbre cannot remain the same over all registers of a voice. Trying to do so, provokes a voice missing the necessary frequencies to produce musical tones on the right pitch and to sound like yelling or screaming. To produce a strong mix-belt sound over a song's complete range often involves a singing style that risks damaging the voice. Nevertheless, merely because some singers take too much risk and their belt sound is occasionally out of tune, belting should not generally be seen as vocal abuse – as confirm the life-long careers of some belters.

Incorrect classical singing is as much vocal abuse as incorrect belting. A voice missing the right pitch sounds as ugly in classical singing as in belting. LeBorgne confirms that classical singers may experience as many nodules on the vocal cords by an incorrect sound production as belters.²⁹⁵ Even putting belters in a "high-risk category" is only hypoth-

²⁸⁹ Richard Miller cit. in Hollien and Miles, "Whither Belting?" 68.

²⁹⁰ Wilbur James Gould cit. in *ibid.*

²⁹¹ Jay Wilkey cit. in *ibid.*

²⁹² *Ibid.*

²⁹³ James C. McKinney cit. in *ibid.* 69.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁵ LeBorgne, "Perceptual Findings on the Broadway Belt Voice." 685.

esizing. “It becomes the job of the voice teacher/pathologist to teach them how to use the vocal mechanism in the healthiest manner possible, striving to achieve a sound that is hired in the Broadway houses,”²⁹⁶ states Le Borgne. Singers that possess a natural loudness like Merman, ear-piercing high notes like Streisand or a mix-belt voice like Menzel’s (usually adequate to portray roles like Elphaba), need to be recognized as belters in the best sense of the expression: They are capable of producing an individual, strong belt sound that fits their vocal abilities and their signature song’s range.

Since the time Merman sang without any amplification on a Broadway stage up to the year Menzel belted out with a body mike on the same stages, the perceptual aesthetics of belting has changed. According to LeBorgne, “It may be the emotional commitment they [the singers] make to that vocal production which keeps audiences returning for more.”²⁹⁷ Additionally, Doscher asserts that “individual differences in articulatory behavior (and therefore of timbre) are the result not only of habitual ‘settings,’ but also of regional accents, language dialects, and personal ways of expressing emotion.”²⁹⁸ Thus, there are many more factors to be considered that influence the belt sound. As Roland Barthes declares:

We rarely listen to a voice en soi, in itself, we listen to what it says. The voice has the very status of language, an object thought to be graspable only through what it transmits; however, just as we are now learning, thanks to the notion of “text,” to read the linguistic material itself, we must in the same way learn to listen to the voice’s text, its meaning, everything in the voice which overflows meaning.²⁹⁹

Therefore, if the sound of a voice depends not only on vocal attributes, each belter needs to find a way to use her belting abilities at their best

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ Barbara Doscher, *The Functional Unity of the Singing Voice* (Lanham, Md.: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1994). 128.

²⁹⁹ Roland Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice – Interviews 1962–1980* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985). 183–184.

to also transmit emotions and to give meaning to her vocal expression. Menzel might not always sing on the right pitch, but she is indeed committed and emotional. As Katharine E. Salsbury notes, an elite belter “gives it all” and “the audience always knows.”³⁰⁰ Menzel’s belt sound might be risky and her voice occasionally misused, but I agree with Seashore, that “the artistic expression of feeling in music consists in esthetic deviation from the regular – from pure tone, true pitch, even dynamics, metronomic time, rigid rhythms, etc.”³⁰¹ Additionally, Seashore has rightly pointed out that “in the ensemble of such deviation from the regular lies the beauty, the charm, the grandeur of music.”³⁰² What is this deviation he speaks of? “You either got it, or you ain’t,” sings the leading lady in “Rose’s Turn,” the character Rose’s last song, in *Gypsy*.³⁰³ The “it” is what Barthes calls “the *grain* of the voice.”³⁰⁴ It cannot “be defined scientifically because it implies a certain erotic relationship between the voice and the listener. One can, therefore, describe the grain of a voice, but only through metaphors.”³⁰⁵ Consequently, the grain of a belt voice depends not only on a singer’s musical ear and the voice’s loudness, pitch, and timbre but also the singer’s individual emotional expression and the ways in and extend to which it is appreciated by the audience.

If a belter needs the help of a voice teacher to develop the belt voice, the chosen teacher will probably use metaphors to help the singer activate the right muscles to produce a belt sound, because the use of metaphors has a long tradition in voice teaching.³⁰⁶ Belting can be taught concerning loudness and pitch, but can the voice teacher’s metaphors help a belter to learn how to use the unique timbre of her voice to express emotions? Is this unique timbre responsible for a belter’s *grain*

³⁰⁰ Katharine E. Salsbury, “Estill Voice Training: The Key to Holistic Voice and Speech Training for the Actor” (Thesis (M.A.), Virginia Commonwealth University, 2014). 42f.

³⁰¹ Carl E. Seashore, *Psychology of Music* (New York: Dover Publications, 1967). Pos. 480.

³⁰² Ibid. Pos. 480.

³⁰³ Styne, Laurens, and Sondheim, *Gypsy – Original Vocal Score*. 2-6-53.

³⁰⁴ Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice – Interviews 1962-1980*. 184.

³⁰⁵ Ibid.

³⁰⁶ For further information on the subject, see for example Barbara Hoos Jokisch, *Die geistige Klangvorstellung. Franziska Martienßen-Lohmann – Gesangstheorie und Gesangs-pädagogik* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 2015) and all books by Martienßen-Lohmann herself.

that catches the audience's attention? Does the grain of the voice depend above all on nature's gift and individual talent, or can it be found in a belt sound achieved through vocal lessons? To approach answers to these questions, a discourse analysis about vocal technique will be the subject of the next chapter.

2.3 Belting – Nature's Gift and Vocal Technique

The desire to sing is, above all, based on the passion for a certain style of music. At the age of 17, I had been singing for two years on stage in an entertainment band in the small town where I grew up and was starting to realize there was something more I could strive for: a trained voice that would allow me to sing some more difficult songs that I liked. I asked my mother to get me vocal lessons, but she did not understand why I wanted this; in her opinion, singing was just a *natural talent*. She did not see the voice as the instrument it is, one that can be practiced with and improved, tuned, and honed. Serendipitously, in the end, my mother did allow me to take vocal lessons, and I was lucky to be taught by voice teachers, open to my passion for modern repertoire.

For any young singer growing up outside the reach of one of the capital cities of the world, the voice teacher is likely to be an opera singer him- or herself, or a choir conductor who has learned basics in classical singing. While both may well have a different pedagogical approach, in general, they will follow the standards of vocal pedagogy. Vocal pedagogy includes, for example, human anatomy and physiology, breathing and air support, phonation, and voice projection.³⁰⁷ The intention of vocal pedagogy is, first of all, to teach a healthy singing style, obeying the rules of acoustics to create the best musical tones possible. Thus, independently of the preferred musical genre, a student is interested in, young singers learn a vocal technique for classical music, usually referred to as *Bel canto technique*.

³⁰⁷ James McKinney, *The Diagnosis and Correction of Vocal Faults* (Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press, Inc., 1994). 8–10.

Bel canto is originally an Italian vocal style used in Europe and especially in Italy in aria-dominated operas as early as the 1640s.³⁰⁸ The term became the signification of a “school” by the mid-1800s.³⁰⁹ At this time, vocal art shifted to the dramatic style, and *Bel canto* represented the “lost” vocal art of lyrical, light, and agile singing with ornamentations, the so-called *beautiful singing*.³¹⁰ According to Erna Brand-Seltei, *Bel canto* as a vocal technique insinuates Manuel Garcia’s treatise “L’Art du Chant,” which immortalized *Bel canto* principles.³¹¹ These principles include singing with proper respiration, correct voice placement and voice support, and different musical aesthetics, for example, *crescendo/diminuendo, legato/staccato, portamento, messa di voce, rubato*, and *vibrato*, to find a musically perfect vocal melody line.³¹² The disagreement in pedagogical literature about whether *Bel canto* should be understood as a singing style, a school, or a vocal technique leaves the term to a general sense of representing a “classically” trained voice of opera and concert singers, also called the *cultivated voice* or *elite vocalism*.³¹³

To cultivate my own singing voice, I studied classical vocal technique, despite the inconsistent combination of non-classical repertoire and classical vocal technique. I was passionate about singing jazz, musicals, pop music, as well as evergreens, and I discovered that *Bel canto* qualities are influential, but are not always the most crucial factor to sing modern repertoire. It was my goal to produce a belt sound that, as Michael Fuhr says, could serve the full expression of deep emotions through the singing voice in favor of the song’s interpretation.³¹⁴ Although I understood that the singing voice develops not only through physiological functions, but equally through a specific emotional state,³¹⁵

³⁰⁸ Stark, *Bel Canto – A History of Vocal Pedagogy*. xix.

³⁰⁹ Scott L. Balthazar, *Historical Dictionary of Opera* (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press Inc., 2013). 48–49.

³¹⁰ Ibid. 48–49.

³¹¹ Erna Brand-Seltei cit. in Stark, *Bel Canto – A History of Vocal Pedagogy*. xix–xx.

³¹² Manuel Garcia, *Art of Singing – A Compendious Method of Instructions, with Examples and Exercises* (Boston: O. Ditson Company, 1800). 5–14.

³¹³ Stark, *Bel Canto – A History of Vocal Pedagogy*. xx.

³¹⁴ Michael Fuhr, *Globalization and Popular Music in South Korea – Sounding Out K-Pop* (New York: Routledge, 2016). 106.

³¹⁵ Husler and Rodd-Marling, *Singen – Die physische Natur des Stimmorgans – Anleitung zur Ausbildung der Singstimme*. 15.

I decided to follow primarily the path of classical vocal technique to master my musical instrument *and* to try to keep a belt sound in modern music repertoire. Based on this experience as a singer in opera, musical, pop music, and jazz, followed by years as a voice teacher, I can say that belting and *Bel canto* do not exclude each other, but, even so, using a classical vocal technique for belting will not work without some crucial adjustments.

In general, professional voice teachers are classically trained, following the vocal pedagogy for classical voices. Through the growing demand of young singers to sing exclusively popular music and Broadway musical theatre repertoire, voice teachers have needed to adjust the subject of their lessons. Usually, the classically-trained voice teacher does not know how to belt and is convinced of the overall value of classical vocal technique to achieve professional singing in any style.³¹⁶ If a vocal student wants to belt exclusively, the voice teacher adjusts the teaching method slightly and tries to find new explanations to help the student to reach the desired belt sound. Nevertheless, the teacher transmits the principles of the *Bel canto* technique. Opinions in the academic field differ as to whether a classical vocal technique is useful for belting or not, or whether there exists a different vocal technique to learn how to belt out a song. Hence, I will shortly present excerpts from the substantial discourse about belting within the academic field of voice research and voice pedagogy, then analyze voice teaching in the context of belting, and finally discuss the changed aesthetics of belting due to amplification.

2.3.1 Voice Research and Belting Technique

Voice research is essential to learn more about the acoustics of the belt sound and to understand the physiological state of the vocal instrument while belting. Nevertheless, acoustic research cannot develop a method based on physiological facts to explain how to belt out a song,

³¹⁶ Many singers and voice teachers discuss the importance of classical vocal technique for any repertoire on the World Wide Web under keywords like *classical vocal technique*, *singing technique*, *vocal pedagogy*, and so on.

because singing is not just exercising a physiological process. During the last twenty years, voice research has improved, especially through new phoniatric inventions such as software to visualize the structure of the tone and the technical capability to record videos of vocal folds in the middle of tone production. As demonstrated in chapter 2.2, it is possible to describe and measure the structure of belted tones. Studies of the belt voice have presented its significant differences from the classically-trained voice, especially with regard to its physical execution. When Sundberg and Margareta Thälén state that “[belting’s] respiratory, phonatory, and resonatory characteristics are unclear,”³¹⁷ they put the problem in a nutshell: Unclear characteristics suggest that belters have no vocal technique or at least a very personal one. Study results like those of Thalen and Sundberg, which conclude that “belting is not associated with a characteristic breathing behavior but is produced with higher subglottal pressure,”³¹⁸ or Christianne Roll’s advice that “voice teachers should be aware of the variability of their female musical theatre voice students,”³¹⁹ let suggest that a belt voice is pedagogically difficult to handle and that belting could be unhealthy and inconstant.

Contrary to *Bel canto*, belting is primarily a question of sound and has no principles that make *healthy* singing a priority. However, Broadway belters and musical belters worldwide play their parts at least five days per week over several months or even years. Moreover, some elite belters do so for most of the span of their careers, over forty, even fifty years. They appear to be as healthy (or not) as opera singers with comparable careers, and their voices sound nearly still the same over the years, making no mention of natural degradation due to age. Consequently, these belters must be doing something right with their vocal hygiene. Indeed, the existence of some vocal technical patterns for healthy belting is evident. According to Richard Miller, “It is neither helpful nor scientifically justified to dismiss any particular genre of singing (including hard rock) as medically unacceptable [...], a ‘right way’ can be found to

³¹⁷ Sundberg and Thälén, “Respiratory and Acoustical Differences Between Belt and Neutral Style of Singing.” 418.

³¹⁸ Ibid.

³¹⁹ Roll, “The Evolution of the Female Broadway Belt Voice: Implications for Teachers and Singers.” 639e8.

do almost anything with the voice.”³²⁰ To find the right way to belt is the goal of every belter, with or without the support of a voice teacher. In any case, if a voice teacher takes care of a belt voice, considering results of actual scientific research about belting is crucial to support the singer in discovering a personal belt sound that is as healthy as possible.

2.3.2 Voice Teachers' Approach to Belting

As mentioned before, physiological knowledge of the vocal apparatus is necessary for a voice teacher to recognize and repair unhealthy singing habits. Essential academic works about the singing process in our body, for example *Singing: The Physical Nature of the Vocal Organ. A Guide to the Unlocking of the Singing Voice* by Yvonne Rodd-Marling and Fred-eric Husler, are usually part of a voice teacher’s education.³²¹ The authors explain in detail the process of muscle work in our body when singing. As a voice teacher myself, I would confirm that the knowledge of the physiological process while singing is crucial to recognize such physical problems as a blocked lower jaw or tense muscles of the larynx. As Rachel Lebon states:

Belting must be regarded and presented as high-efficiency phonation – that is, it exacts tremendous energy, sustained projection and support, and thus optimal vocal technique, control, and efficiency. An integral part of belting pedagogy must therefore include explanations that foster knowledge of the vocal mechanism, awareness of what constitutes vocal abuse and misuse, and strategies to produce the vocal sounds that are demanded, efficiently, with the objective of vocal endurance. Equipped with this factual information, the professional singer would be better able to deal with the pressures placed on vocalists who are often made to feel that they are being “prima donnas” or labeled as “difficult” when they are merely exercising good vocal maintenance.³²²

³²⁰ Richard Miller cit. in Robert Thayer Sataloff, *Treatment of Voice Disorders* (San Diego: Plural Publishing, Inc., 2017).80.

³²¹ Since I studied using the German version of this book, I will refer to the German version in subsequent footnotes.

³²² Lebon, *The Professional Vocalist: A Handbook for Commercial Singers and Teachers*. 117.

However, the voice teacher should rarely transmit this knowledge directly to the singer. For example, advice such as “contract your larynx muscles” will normally provoke precisely the wrong action in the singer’s vocal apparatus. Likewise, Jan Sullivan’s explanation could be widely misunderstood when he states:

The Belt sound is produced by a vocal mechanism in which the larynx is slightly higher than in classical voice and the vocal cords come together firmly and cleanly and are held together for a longer time than in other types of singing. Belt is a split resonance – forward mask resonance plus forward speaking quality.³²³

Without guidance on how to use the vocal mechanism, this explanation (as any explanations that do not include *how* to do something) could provoke a singer to over-force the vocal folds in producing a belt tone. According to Husler/Rodd-Marling, the functional form of the singing instrument develops through the interconnection of all parts of the vocal organ and serves uniquely for the singing purpose.³²⁴ Thus, the singing instrument only *exists* through the coherent movements of many muscles and muscle groups, which work together in a cyclic process.³²⁵ Consequently, these muscle movements need to be activated. Some muscles can be trained actively, while so-called *smooth muscles*,³²⁶ like the vocal folds, contract automatically. The brain cannot activate them by direct order. Simplified: the brain can order “move arm right, raise it, and wave hello to your neighbor,” but it cannot directly order the larynx to lower. On the contrary, a vocal teacher will advise a singer to imagine a deep inhalation, or sucking in the tone, in order to provoke the opening of the lower jaw without forcing and, thus, the larynx’s

³²³ Sullivan, *The Phenomena of the Belt/Pop Voice*. 16.

³²⁴ Husler and Rodd-Marling, *Singen – Die physische Natur des Stimmorgans – Anleitung zur Ausbildung der Singstimme*. 28.

³²⁵ Ibid.

³²⁶ Smooth muscles, also called involuntary muscles, are subject to reflexes and cannot be actively trained, but their ability improves through physical labor. The vocal folds are two bands of smooth muscles. For more information, see OpenStax, *Anatomie & Physiology* (Houston: Rice University, 2016), <http://cnx.org/contents/14fb4ad7-39a1-4eee-ab6e-3ef2482e3e22@8.24>.

position will be lowered. Such *metaphors* can support correct muscle work for singing.

Picturesque language in voice teaching has a long tradition of using symbols and figures to provoke the right physical process of tone production in a singer's mind. In Europe, Paul Lohmann and his wife, Franziska Martienssen-Lohmann, were two of the most influential classical voice teachers of the 20th century.³²⁷ Their method implies the intensive use of metaphors. For example, taking deep respiration like smelling a rose is an established metaphor to cause the effect of lowering the diaphragm, or imaging the tone coming out of the skullcap to activate voice placement.³²⁸ Consequently, if figurative language is an effective tool to teach *singing* in general, it should be the right way to teach belting. Yet, presenting a discursive analysis of statements by recognized voice teachers will support my argument that it is difficult to present a clear method for teaching belting.

For example, Rachel Lebon characterizes belting as a “vocal production that proceeds out of the speaking range, with the prosody of speech, and that promotes a sense of spontaneity and aggressiveness.”³²⁹ Here, belting could be misunderstood as “singing with the speaking voice producing an aggressive sound.” Jeanette LoVetri defines belting as “just a label given to a certain aspect of chest register function.”³³⁰ However, as demonstrated, belting is not a label and does not exclusively concern the chest voice. Her method, the “Somatic Voicework,” is supposed to “increase intuition about vocal choices.”³³¹ Without going into details, I would argue that LoVetri’s online explanations of her method are not very specific and can be summarized as *it depends*.³³² Additionally, as

³²⁷ Schott Music GmbH & Co. KG, “Paul Lohmann,” accessed March 6, 2020. <https://de.schott-music.com/shop/autoren/paul-lohmann>.

³²⁸ Besides the studies of multiple works of Martienssen-Lohmann and Lohmann, as *Der wissende Sänger* and *Stimmler*, *Stimmlberatung*, my voice teacher Professor Carola Sonne imparted knowledge about their method. Sonne studied with Paul Lohmann and followed his teaching method throughout her teaching career.

³²⁹ Lebon, *The Professional Vocalist: A Handbook for Commercial Singers and Teachers*. 112.

³³⁰ Jeannette LoVetri, “Voice Pedagogy: Female Chest Voice,” *Journal of Singing* 60, no. 2 (2003). 162.

³³¹ Jeannette L. LoVetri, “The Voice Workshop,” accessed March 21, 2017. <http://thevoiceworkshop.com/somatic-voicework/>.

³³² Ibid.

mentioned at the beginning of chapter 2.2.1, Susan Boardman goes so far as to define a belt tone as a “tense, rough, driving, bright, vibrato-less, assertive yell.”³³³ However, I showed that belting (on the right pitch) is not yelling. Jeannie Gagné describes physical sensations and “feelings” when she explains:

Simply stated, belting is a type of singing that is robust, bright, and loud. Pitch rises, volume increases. A strong sensation of air pressure comes up from your lungs and through your vocal mechanism, creating the feeling of pressing the voice through notes that are becoming tauter as they rise. Then, similar to speaking loudly, belting for contemporary styles typically uses a bright timbre that is placed more “forward” in the mouth when compared with a classical singing approach.³³⁴

Knowing that pressure is often responsible for singing out-of-tune, it is certainly questionable whether “pressing the voice through notes” would be helpful advice for a singer. What Gagné calls “a strong sensation of air pressure” can only be a subjective perception and might be very different for singers of small size and low weight compared to taller, heavier singers. The creator of *The Complete Vocal Technique*, Cathrine Sadolin, replaces the term *belting* with the term *edge*, and calls it a “full-metallic mode” which has a “light aggressive, sharp and screaming character, like when you imitate a diving airplane.”³³⁵ Again, correctly exercised belting is not screaming. Sadolin first describes the sound as she perceives it before she advises to *copy* this sound through the metaphor “imitating a diving airplane.” The perception of a belted tone as the *noise* of a diving airplane is subjective and inconsistent; remembering that aircraft noise is generally considered *noise pollution*, this metaphor cannot be really useful for a belter.

These few comments represent a small selection of a considerable number of statements available in method books, on YouTube channels, or generally on the World Wide Web. Although these excerpts cannot

³³³ Boardman, *Voice Training for the Musical Theater Singer*. 25.

³³⁴ Gagné, *Belting – A Guide to Healthy, Powerful Singing*. 1.

³³⁵ Alchetron, “Edge (formerly ‘Belting’),” Alchetron, accessed June 3, 2020. <https://alchetron.com/Complete-Vocal-Technique>.

represent all aspects of these voice teachers' methods, they represent an inconsistency in describing and teaching the belt sound. Jamie Read seems to recognize this reality when he states that "pedagogically, there is little evidence of a clear technique for teaching belting."³³⁶ I share the view of many voice professionals who believe in the necessity for a healthy vocal technique for professional belting and agree with most voice teachers that the belt sound needs a forward voice placement, loudness achieved by active support, and a bright timbre. However, these necessities are traditionally taught through classical vocal technique, which cannot be adequate for belting. The next chapter concentrates on how classical vocal technique needs to be adjusted to avoid classical tone production in order to reach a belt sound, aiming for a possible practical explanation of how to produce a belt sound.

2.3.3 Belting and Vocal Technique – How to Avoid *Bel Canto* Sound

To achieve loudness and singing in tune, a belt voice needs support and an accurate voice placement as much as the classically-trained voice. Thus, sooner or later, even a very talented singer usually needs a certain degree of vocal technique to protect the voice and to control the instrument over a long career.³³⁷ Since the *Bel canto* technique is designated to produce a healthy, but exclusively classical vocal sound,³³⁸ the classical vocal technique needs adaptation for the needs of belting.

Remembering that belting originally developed through singers without voice training, it is still very common today for passionate ama-

³³⁶ Jamie Read, "Defining the Key Voice Qualities in Musical Theatre – Belt, Mix and Legit: A Review of the Literature," accessed April 3, 2019. <https://thevoiceteacher.co.uk/2020/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Research-Report-FINAL-PUBLISHED.pdf>.

³³⁷ Natural singers like Merman, usually musically very talented, *can* be exceptions and know instinctively what to do with their voices. However, as soon as such singers incur musical, health or emotional problems, keeping the sound quality is much more difficult without at least a basic understanding of vocal technique. As different biographies show, for example Patti LuPone's, it is often in this moment that even a natural singer asks for help from a voice teacher, vocal coach or just a good friend who knows. See LuPone and Diehl, *Patti LuPone – A Memoir*. 123.

³³⁸ Stark, *Bel Canto – A History of Vocal Pedagogy*. xx.

teur singers, especially young girls, to try to learn by doing, copying the sound of iconic singers. Additionally, not everyone passionate about singing has access to or can afford vocal lessons. Today's possibility of finding Karaoke versions of songs on YouTube and many other platforms facilitates the learning of a song without a score and a répétiteur. In most cases, the singer reaches the untrained voice's natural limits quickly during her training and must recognize that she cannot reach all notes in the same sound as the original singer. Unfortunately, at this point, most untrained singers do not start to figure out how the song could work for *their* voice. They continue trying to imitate the vocal sound of their idols. Although a singer might try different ways and methods³³⁹ for some time and even resolve a problem of vocal technique or two, she will probably never be able to control her instrument, because she does not know what she is doing with her voice. While singers like Ethel Merman have an instinct for the use and the limits of their voice and can achieve a personal belt sound on their own, this is generally not the case, since such a natural singer needs a high level of musical talent and a natural musical ear to do so. As Merman said about her first vaudeville experiences:

When I was little, some famous soprano would be singing, and I'd be lost to the world. But let her go a little off key – it didn't have to be much – and I'd dig Pop in the ribs with my elbow. I had a good ear even then.³⁴⁰

As explained in the previous chapter, a “good ear” represents the ability to perceive harmonics and is one of the requirements for musical talent. Although this talent is probably the most evident requirement to become a professional singer, training in how to produce the wanted sound *physically*, in combination with the best possible perception of harmonics, is necessary. While classical voice teachers usually teach from the very first lesson on the use of the vocal tract as a resonator to achieve the singer's self-amplified sound, basic voice placement can

³³⁹ The use of tutorials on YouTube is a common practice. However, I would not recommend working with for any musical instrument, especially not the voice, without qualified feedback whether or not following such explanations can deliver the correct result.

³⁴⁰ Merman and Eells, *Merman*. 23.

easily be trained through light head-voice exercises. However, by implicating the vocal tract as the resonator in voice placement exercises, for example lifting the soft palate into the yawning position, voice placement is no longer “neutral.” Then, voice placement and the *roomy sound* of classical singing are being produced together. Once the singer is used to this classical voice position, it involves great flexibility to return to a neutral position while singing.³⁴¹ Other aspects of the classical voice placement are round and broad vowels to make the tone more voluminous. These vowels are the main reason that the lyrics of an opera aria are rarely completely understandable because arias are *vowel*-driven. Today, the audience is used to reading the lyrics of an opera aria on the screen above the theater stage, and nobody pays attention to this problem anymore. However, belted songs are *text*-driven, and the audience should understand every word of an elite belter if the tempo of the song allows it.³⁴² Thus, for the voice placement of a belted tone, it is necessary to adapt exercises of classical vocal technique to a natural voice placement without especially round vowels in favor of good diction. Consequently, the most significant difference between belting and classical singing lies in the combination of a natural voice placement for *singing* with a diction typically used for *speaking*. This could be one reason that many vocal experts connect belting to the speaking voice – and many more-or-less self-trained belters frequently sing out-of-tune.

The difference between belting and classical singing regarding voice support is comparable to the difference in voice placement between these styles. To support the voice by lowering the diaphragm is correct for any singing style, but in classical singing, the support holds and nearly *restrains* the voice. According to Husler and Rodd-Marling, the singer uses the imagination of a strength coming from the lower back to push against the upper chest to activate all expiration muscles.³⁴³ In

³⁴¹ In vocal lessons, it always appears to be difficult for classically-trained singers to do a voice placement exercise with a relaxed soft palate and without yawning.

³⁴² For example, Merman was known for her good diction. According to Irving Berlin, “You’d better write her a good lyric. The guy in the last row of the second balcony is going to hear every syllable.” See Schumach, “Ethel Merman, Queen of Musicals, Dies at 76.”

³⁴³ Husler and Rodd-Marling, *Singen – Die physische Natur des Stimmorgans – Anleitung zur Ausbildung der Singstimme*. 67.

classical singing, the vocal folds receive just the amount of air that is necessary to produce a tone, and the compressed air is held back.³⁴⁴ All body muscles that can help to keep the lungs widely opened are concerned. This action makes classical singing a whole-body experience. By giving room through widening her body for classical singing, the singer can produce full, round tones. Conversely, the support for the belt voice concentrates on the compressed air stream that gives a belted tone its intensive character. This compressed air stream is also responsible for generally much less vibrato in belting, contrary to classical singing. However, this compressed air stream should *not* push against the larynx – which would be yelling, as explained by Husler and Rodd-Marling.³⁴⁵ Wrongful pushing against the larynx can be avoided by implicating a correct voice placement; for example, it could be helpful to imagine the compressed air stream to be blown out like water from a hose under pressure *through* the correctly trained voice placement.³⁴⁶

In summary, the vocal technical differences in voice placement and support for classical singing and belting are small but compulsory. Although sharing Robert Edwin's assessment that tall, round vowels and a continuous vibrato do not serve to belt,³⁴⁷ his overall conclusion that classical vocal technique will not serve nonclassical singers needs to be adjusted.³⁴⁸ The responsibility of teaching only the *essential* elements of the *Bel canto* technique *without* the *Bel canto sound* remains in the hands of the voice teacher. *Bel canto* and belting do not exclude each other,³⁴⁹ but the *execution* of fundamental vocal technical principles to achieve a belt sound versus a *Bel canto* sound needs to be different. Belting on the right pitch with voice support in favor of a healthy belt voice can be taught, but that does not answer the question of how to produce

³⁴⁴ Ibid. 68, 70.

³⁴⁵ Ibid.

³⁴⁶ For a more detailed explanation about my method to teach the support of the belt voice, see Bonin, *Belt Voice Training – Singing With a Belting Voice*. 24–31.

³⁴⁷ Edwin, "Belt is Legit." 214.

³⁴⁸ "Belting: bel canto or brutto canto?," *Journal of Singing* 59, no. September/October (2002). 68.

³⁴⁹ Singers like Audra MacDonald confirm this point of view. She effortlessly switches from classical singing in *Porgy and Bess* to the part of Billie Holiday in *Lady Day at Emerson's Bar & Grill*.

the belt sound. The third factor upon which the belt sound depends is the voice's timbre. Since the sound of an elite belt voice is utterly different from that of a classical singer's, the next chapter deals with the question of whether the belt voice timbre can be taught and learned.

2.3.4 Belt Voice Timbre, Vocal Beauty, and Vocal Technique

Contrary to *Bel canto* voices, the term *beautiful singing* usually does not refer to belt voices. For example, critics who may be admirers nevertheless call Carol Channing's voice "raspy,"³⁵⁰ Betty Buckley's voice "haunted and steely,"³⁵¹ and Elaine Stritch's singing style "curmudgeonly and whiskey-drenched."³⁵² Other examples of belters are Angela Lansbury, named a "knockout comedy belter,"³⁵³ Patti LuPone, whose vocal expression is known as "singing with a joyful blare and leering swoops,"³⁵⁴ and Sutton Foster's belting, branded as "blowing her horn."³⁵⁵ Each of these belters keeps her timbre in favor of the *emotional quality* while interpreting a Broadway musical song. However, even if these belters cannot win first prize for vocal beauty in the sense of classical tone production, their voices are unique and musically irreproachable.³⁵⁶ Remembering Margaret Wolfe Hungerford's phrase, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder,"³⁵⁷ the argument that the vocal beauty of a belt voice mainly depends on its quality as an *authentic emotional performance*

³⁵⁰ Tim Gray, "Remembering Carol Channing: A Master of Channeling the Power of Personality," *Variety*, no. January 15 (2019), <https://variety.com/2019/legit/news/carol-channing-dies-tribute-appreciation-1203108891/>.

³⁵¹ Adam Feldman and David Cote, "The 25 Best Broadway Divas of All Time," accessed May 9, 2019. <https://www.timeout.com/newyork/theater/broadways-25-all-time-greatest-divas-broadway>.

³⁵² Ibid.

³⁵³ Ibid.

³⁵⁴ Ibid.

³⁵⁵ Ibid.

³⁵⁶ "Musically irreproachable" means, in this context, singing on the right pitch, harmonizing with the music and respecting timing and rhythm, which are basic principles for the voice as a musical instrument.

³⁵⁷ Gary Martin, "Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder," accessed May 9, 2019. <https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/beauty-is-in-the-eye-of-the-beholder.html>.

in front of the respective audience is stronger than advocating for the best possible physical tone production.

The ideal of vocal beauty in the Western cultural world is different from that in Asian countries. In Thailand, for example, the musical tone of a female singing voice in a lower range which has a dark and *hard* sound is experienced as beautiful. In India, Indonesia, and Polynesia, *Bel canto* corresponds to the sound of an airy head voice.³⁵⁸ When a voice becomes a musical instrument, the vocal organ produces the sound with its physical mechanism, and (to remember traditional vocal technique) the singer uses imagination to pull the best out of it and to give it emotional quality.³⁵⁹ According to Husler and Rodd-Marling, a voice is *euphonious* if the beautiful tone develops through maximum stretching and minimum tension of the vocal folds and, only if this is the case, the voice presents an emotional quality.³⁶⁰ This functional combination is responsible for vocal beauty, independently of the anatomic condition of the vocal apparatus.³⁶¹ Husler and Rodd-Marling consider the singing voice to be a natural physical, vocal quality that provokes the voice's emotional quality automatically.³⁶² Consequently, according to these theories, vocal beauty would depend on the technically efficient tone production of a voice. Husler and Rodd-Marling go as far as speaking of *voice abuse* in oriental cultures and *denaturation* of the singing voice in the context of yodeling and Flamenco singing.³⁶³ They also consider modern Jazz singing as an *alienation* of the singing voice, eliminating the natural beauty of the tone.³⁶⁴

Agreeing again with Richard Miller that “a ‘right way’ can be found to do almost anything with the voice,”³⁶⁵ I would argue that Husler and Rodd-Marling mix up the functional aspect of a healthy singing voice as a matter of technical efficiency with the aesthetic issue of beauty.

³⁵⁸ Husler and Rodd-Marling, *Singen – Die physische Natur des Stimmorgans – Anleitung zur Ausbildung der Singstimme*. 123.

³⁵⁹ Ibid. 124.

³⁶⁰ Ibid. 126.

³⁶¹ Ibid.

³⁶² Ibid.

³⁶³ Ibid. 128.

³⁶⁴ Ibid.

³⁶⁵ Richard Miller cit. in Sataloff, *Treatment of Voice Disorders*. 80.

According to Crispin Sartwell, “Philosophers in the Kantian tradition identify the experience of beauty with disinterested pleasure, psychical distance, and the like, and contrast the aesthetic with the practical.”³⁶⁶ While Husler and Rodd-Marling conclude that technical efficiency (the practical) guides directly to vocal beauty (the aesthetic), Sartwell’s ontological aspect of beauty confirms that beauty might be a question of taste. As Immanuel Kant states, “*Taste* is the faculty of judging an object or mode of representing it by an *entirely disinterested* satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The object of such satisfaction is called *beautiful*.³⁶⁷ *Representing a modified Kantianism*, Roger Scruton writes that “we call something beautiful when we gain pleasure from contemplating it as an individual object, for its own sake, and in its presented form.”³⁶⁸ Thus, the belt sound of a Broadway Belt is beautiful, if its presented form corresponds to the aesthetics of Broadway musical theatre, *without respecting the vocal efficiency of Bel canto* or putting the Western ideal of a beautiful tone in front of the role’s interpretation. *The belt sound just needs to please the respective audience. This idea is also valid for the vocal sound in oriental cultures, yodeling, Jazz or Flamenco singing, and the like.*

Although Husler and Rodd-Marling claim that the emotional quality of a voice depends on the ideal tone, they differentiate between the voice as a musical instrument and its use for interpretation: aesthetics depends on musical style.³⁶⁹ Contrary to classical music, technical efficiency in belting is not the primary issue for musical interpretation. In Broadway musical theatre, the belt voice’s emotional quality serves the interpretation of the character, and the voice as a musical instrument is just the tool to express this quality. Even though Edwin is right when he states that “every style of singing should have in place a systematic vocal technique that supports that style’s mechanical and artistic demands,”³⁷⁰ it is worth remembering Barthes’s suggestion that the audience rarely

³⁶⁶ Crispin Sartwell, “Beauty,” accessed March 9, 2020. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/beauty/>.

³⁶⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. J.H. Bernard (New York: Macmillan, 1951 (1790)). 45.

³⁶⁸ Roger Scruton, *Beauty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). 26.

³⁶⁹ Husler and Rodd-Marling, *Singen – Die physische Natur des Stimmorgans – Anleitung zur Ausbildung der Singstimme*. 128.

³⁷⁰ Edwin, “Belting: bel canto or brutto canto?” 68.

listens to a voice *en soi*,³⁷¹ and, thus, belting is never singing *en soi*. Still, when a Broadway Belt uses her belt voice to portray the character, *authentic performance* in Broadway musical theatre comes alive and can be as beautiful as singing with an airy head-voice in Polynesia or yodeling in the Austrian Alps.

Each belt voice has its own belt sound, defined by the belter's identity of timbre, that presents its emotional quality. The beauty of a belt voice appears in the perception of its emotional quality, not in the technical efficiency of tone production. As Julia C. Hailstone, et al. confirm, "The perception of emotion conveyed by a melody is affected by the identity of timbre of the musical instrument on which it is played."³⁷² Nevertheless, before amplification came into general use in Broadway musical theatre, the *practical aspect of loudness*, which was a necessary priority for a belt voice to be heard throughout the auditorium, subordinated the authentic performance. The shift in Broadway musical theatre's aesthetics required amplification to keep the interpretation of the character perceivable. If a belt voice is not loud enough or the venue and the orchestra too big or all instruments amplified, a microphone allows the belter to keep her belt timbre and to use her belt voice in service of the emotional quality of her interpretation of the role. Although this advantage is undeniable, many belters feel constricted by amplification, as I will show in the next chapter, which concentrates on the development of amplification in Broadway musical theatre and the consequences for the Broadway Belt.

2.3.5 Belting and Amplification

If the audience cannot hear a voice and does not understand the lyrics, the performer's effort to transmit the role's emotional quality is useless. Amplification helps to avoid this loss for the audience. There are three categories of Broadway musical venues: *musical houses* with up to

³⁷¹ Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice – Interviews 1962–1980*. 183.

³⁷² Julia C. Hailstone et al., "It's not what you play, it's how you play it: Timbre Affects Perception of Emotion in Music," *The Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology* 62, no. November 1 (2009): <https://doi.org/10.1080/17470210902765957>. 2152.

1400 seats, so-called *swing houses*³⁷³ with 1200–1400 seats, and *dramatic* houses with a capacity of 700 to 1100 seats.³⁷⁴ *The Broadway Theatre* with 1700-odd seats was many years the largest theater, but, newer houses have a capacity of more than 1800 seats these days.³⁷⁵ From the 1940s until the 1980s, pit orchestras had a size of 25 to 26 players in musical houses, 20 or 21 players in swing houses, and 12 players in a dramatic house.³⁷⁶ Today, the orchestra usually is much smaller, often moved on or above the stage, and exclusively composed of amplified instruments, basically keyboards, guitar, bass, drums, and strings.³⁷⁷ Additionally, the use of digital components like the software Ableton, which plays loops and sound effects (as heard in *Dear Evan Hansen*, for example), creates a contemporary and modern sound.³⁷⁸ In contrast to this general minimalism, in 1971, *On the Town* had the largest orchestrations to that date, with a 28-piece orchestra, and 2017's *Sunset Boulevard* had the largest orchestra ever in Broadway history, with 40 pieces.³⁷⁹ In consequence, big theaters, large orchestras, and their amplification necessitate miking the entire cast to give the audience a unified sound, emitted by loudspeakers. However, the size of the theater is not a primary reason to use amplification: For example, *Anything Goes* opened without amplification in 1935 at the Alvin Theatre, with its 1428 seats (today 1445).³⁸⁰ In contrast, the first and second Broadway revivals in 1989 and 2002 opened at the Vivian Beaumont Theatre with amplification to its 1200 seats,³⁸¹ and the fourth revival in 2012 at the Stephen Sondheim Theatre,

³⁷³ The name “swing houses” implies that these venues are suitable for a small musical or a large non-musical. See Steven Suskin, *The Sound of Broadway Music: A Book of Orchestrators and Orchestrations* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2009), 234.

³⁷⁴ Ibid.

³⁷⁵ Ibid. 235.

³⁷⁶ Ibid. 236.

³⁷⁷ David Yazbek, interview by Barry Singer, 2018. <http://www.playbill.com/article/the-changing-state-of-broadways-pit-orchestras>.

³⁷⁸ Ibid.

³⁷⁹ Ibid.

³⁸⁰ Mark Peikert, “Alvin Theatre,” accessed May 10, 2019. <http://www.playbill.com/venue/alvin-theatre-vault-ooooooooo32>.

³⁸¹ Lincoln Center Theater, “Vivian Beaumont Theatre,” accessed March 10, 2020. <https://www.lct.org/about/beaumont-theater/>.

with only 1055 seats, also used amplification.³⁸² Thus, contrary to the original version, the revivals used amplification in even smaller houses. That is to say that amplification in Broadway musical theatre is not a matter of the theater's size, but an aesthetic issue.

Belters might not always have a voice loud enough to fill the room of today's Broadway musical theaters, while, at the rise of musical theatre, belt voices *had to be* loud, since they were not amplified. As Lehmann Engel states, "What they had to do was "place" their voices differently – in a lower 'belting' register – and (to put it as simply as possible) to make them fat and loud without making them round. They sang more on words than on pure vocal lines."³⁸³ These early belters changed the musical theatre into a performance where delivering the message of the lyrics was equally important to the quality of the voice and the music.³⁸⁴ As early as the mid-nineteen twenties, young composers of new musicals searched for a singer who could exercise this new vocal style and they found her in the person of Ethel Merman, "the legitimation of the belt voice."³⁸⁵ Merman belted long and powerful lines, but not only that: The sound of her belt voice proved that lyrics could be understood up to the theater's second balcony and the dramatic sense of the lyrics could get through.³⁸⁶

At the same time that Merman debuted in *Girl Crazy* in 1930 holding her legendary high-C note for sixteen bars while the orchestra played the melodic line,³⁸⁷ Bing Crosby *crooned* his way to stardom by singing live at the Coconut Grove Ballroom in Los Angeles – with a microphone.³⁸⁸ Although the term *crooning* originally designated the image of a mother singing a lullaby in a soft low tone to put the child to sleep,³⁸⁹

³⁸² Parth Sanwal, "Stephen Sondheim Theatre," accessed May 10, 2019. <https://blog.headout.com/stephen-sondheim-theatre-seating-chart/>.

³⁸³ Lehmann Engel, cited by Mark N. Grant, *The Rise and Fall of the Broadway Musical* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2005). 36.

³⁸⁴ Ibid.

³⁸⁵ Ibid.

³⁸⁶ Ibid.

³⁸⁷ Schumach, "Ethel Merman, Queen of Musicals, Dies at 76."

³⁸⁸ Grant, *The Rise and Fall of the Broadway Musical*. 39.

³⁸⁹ Merriam-Webster Dictionary. 2020, s.v. "croon." <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/croon>.

Crosby's mellifluous singing voice became responsible for the introduction of the term *crooner* for any singer with a soft voice. According to Mark N. Grant, Crosby "made the use of the microphone arguably the single most important innovation in audible entertainment since the ancient Greek amphitheater."³⁹⁰ Crosby mastered the use of the microphone and involved nuances of vocal expression, making every pop singer since his successor in developing the technique of microphone singing.³⁹¹ While Merman and other belters took care that the Broadway musical remained a whole *live* experience, the audience listened to Crosby's soft voice through loudspeakers.³⁹² As Grant confirms, "Crosby's sound was alive, but not live."³⁹³ Crosby's importance in the development of live singing with a microphone is evident, but Grant exaggerates the issue when he states that "except in the opera house, the human voice has ever after been a processed phenomenon."³⁹⁴ Amplification only slowly had a significant effect on the tone production and role interpretation in Broadway musical theatre.³⁹⁵ It was at the end of the so-called Golden Age of Broadway, when Broadway musical theatre had developed from book musicals into concept musicals, dance musicals, rock- and jukebox musicals, that the vocal demands on a Broadway Belt changed massively.

Even if the first microphones were used in a Broadway musical as early as 1938,³⁹⁶ the official landmark for the beginning of microphone practice in Broadway musical theatre was placed in 1957 through Hal Prince's statement that "We didn't... use microphones until West Side Story."³⁹⁷ However, already between the 1940s and 1960s, *foot mikes*³⁹⁸

³⁹⁰ Grant, *The Rise and Fall of the Broadway Musical*. 40.

³⁹¹ Ibid.

³⁹² Ibid. 40–41.

³⁹³ Ibid. 41.

³⁹⁴ Ibid.

³⁹⁵ Stephen Banfield, *Stage and Screen Entertainers in the Twentieth Century – Amplification and Accommodation*, ed. John Potter, *The Cambridge Companion to Singing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). 77.

³⁹⁶ Ted Chapin, *Everything Was Possible – The Birth of the Musical Follies* (New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2005). 156.

³⁹⁷ Harold Prince cit. in Banfield, *Stage and Screen Entertainers in the Twentieth Century – Amplification and Accommodation*. 77.

³⁹⁸ Microphones placed at the ramp of the stage.

were installed at the ramp of the stage along with the footlights, or mikes were dangled from above by stage technicians or placed within a *box set*.³⁹⁹ The box set was an imaginary box that framed any room like a bedroom, a nightclub, or porch that was part of the show's set.⁴⁰⁰ The performers had to stay in the "room" near the microphones placed in that area to pick up their voices. A famous example of this amplification practice is 1949's *Kiss me Kate* when the characters Fred Graham and Lilli Vanessi sing the duet "Wunderbar" in Vanessi's dressing room.⁴⁰¹ Naturally, an eleven o'clock number of the leading lady or leading man was sung right up by the foot mikes on the stage ramp to provide maximum audibility to the audience.⁴⁰² This form of amplification keeps the original character of the voices alive, allowing the audience's expectations of a Broadway musical as a live show to be satisfied – as long as the singer can sing in front of such a microphone.

Nevertheless, this amplification technique became less satisfying after *West Side Story* revolutionized the Broadway musical theatre with its dramatic content and especially its story-integrated dancing.⁴⁰³ Whereas on Vaudeville comic, lyrical, balletic, gymnastic, and erotic acts were separated acts with music, from now on performers had to be multidisciplinary.⁴⁰⁴ Even if there was dancing in musical plays between the early vaudeville theatre and the premiere of *West Side Story*, for example the dream ballet in *Oklahoma*, generally nobody sang *while* dancing. With *West Side Story*, each performer became a singing and acting dancer, acting and dancing singer, or a dancing and singing actor. Prince called this development of Broadway musical theatre the "inhuman expectations of simultaneous dancing and singing."⁴⁰⁵

³⁹⁹ Timothy R. White, *Blue-Collar Broadway – The Craft and Industry of American Theater* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015). 219.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid.

⁴⁰² Ibid.

⁴⁰³ Bill Rimalower, "Game Changers: The Broadway Musicals That Shaped the Art Form," *Playbill*, no. March 29 (2014), <http://www.playbill.com/article/game-changers-the-broadway-musicals-that-shaped-the-art-form-com-216661>.

⁴⁰⁴ Banfield, *Stage and Screen Entertainers in the Twentieth Century – Amplification and Accommodation*. 77.

⁴⁰⁵ Harold Prince cit. in ibid.

Consequently, to ensure audibility without musical or theatrical loss, *miking*⁴⁰⁶ became a necessity to deliver dramatic dialogues to the audience throughout the theater. Although Banfield states that “the character [Tony in *West Side Story*] is no longer presenting his voice to the audience as the stage act,”⁴⁰⁷ and that “the microphone makes the [high] notes possible [for Larry Kert],”⁴⁰⁸ his point, that amplification “destroyed the acoustic equation between effort and reward, between vocal energy and meaning,”⁴⁰⁹ is contradicted by the example of method actor⁴¹⁰ Larry Kert as Tony. When Kert, with his baritone voice, had to sing “Maria” with its two-octave-range written for a tenor, he might have sounded “like a different person than that from the opening”⁴¹¹ and have lost the “identity of his registers,”⁴¹² but he became *the* Tony, and even Banfield has to admit that Kert’s vocal individuality created an “impressive and powerfully seductive performance.”⁴¹³

The aesthetics of Broadway musical theatre changed with *West Side Story* as a natural development of the genre. As Eric Salzman and Thomas Dési confirm, amplification “allows and encourages the differentiation of style to the point of individualized vocal sound and technique.”⁴¹⁴ Nevertheless, method acting had become popular as early as the late 1930s – at the same time that Jerome Robbins and other choreographers were bringing modern ballet into Broadway musical

⁴⁰⁶ *Miking* is Broadway jargon and a widely used expression for the use of one or more microphones for amplification.

⁴⁰⁷ Banfield, *Stage and Screen Entertainers in the Twentieth Century – Amplification and Accommodation*. 78.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁴¹⁰ Method acting means acting by emotionally identifying with a role. This process became famous as Lee Strasberg’s teaching method in the U.S. through actors like Marlon Brando. Strasberg based his method on Stanislavsky’s work. David Krasner, ed. *Method Acting Reconsidered – Theory, Practice, Future* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000). 4–5.

⁴¹¹ Banfield, *Stage and Screen Entertainers in the Twentieth Century – Amplification and Accommodation*. 78.

⁴¹² Ibid.

⁴¹³ Ibid.

⁴¹⁴ Eric Salzman and Thomas Dési, *The New Music Theater – Seeing the Voice, Hearing the Body* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2008). 23.

theatre.⁴¹⁵ Consequently, acting and dancing in Broadway musical theatre had become, step by step, as crucial as singing, but from *West Side Story* on, the triple threat unified all three talents in one person. In this combination, “identifiable (sometimes strange and unique) voices are often more appreciated than uniform or prototypical voices,”⁴¹⁶ declare Salzman and Dési. Thus, the aesthetics of a belt voice change with those of Broadway musical theatre, and, as pointed out by Salzman and Dési, “amplification and recording encourage the notion of individuality in vocalism.”⁴¹⁷

Since in the context of Broadway musical theatre the aesthetic issue of “sometimes strange and unique voices” often concerns belt voices, it is no surprise that one of the most iconic belters in Broadway musical theatre profited from the next invention in amplification: Carol Channing was the first Broadway star to wear a *body mike*⁴¹⁸ in *Hello, Dolly!* in 1964.⁴¹⁹ This new invention liberated the performer from the necessity of staying in the box set or stepping near the foot mikes.⁴²⁰ The technical development continued, and, in 1975, body mikes made it possible for every actor of *A Chorus Line* to be heard and understood while singing, acting, and dancing all over the stage.⁴²¹ By the end of the 1970s, all leading performers, at least, had to wear a body mike, without exception.⁴²² The sound was somewhat primitive: *Evita*, for example, had many “intractable sound problems,”⁴²³ the band and the perform-

⁴¹⁵ Banfield, *Stage and Screen Entertainers in the Twentieth Century – Amplification and Accommodation*. 78.

⁴¹⁶ Salzman and Dési, *The New Music Theater – Seeing the Voice, Hearing the Body*. That 23.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid.

⁴¹⁸ A body mike (also called a lavalier mic or body/lav/clip/collar mic), is a microphone attached to the performer's body, usually scotch-taped on the forehead under the wig or as discretely as possible on the cheekbone. Its cable goes under the costume to a device that transmits the audio signal to the receiver. Then, the receiver is connected to the sound system of the theater. See Arthur Fox, “Are Microphones Used On Broadway And In Other Theatres?,” accessed April 20, 2020. <https://mynewmicrophone.com/are-microphones-used-on-broadway-and-in-other-theatres/>.

⁴¹⁹ White, *Blue-Collar Broadway – The Craft and Industry of American Theater*. 219.

⁴²⁰ Ibid.

⁴²¹ Ibid.

⁴²² Ibid.

⁴²³ Ibid. 220.

ers were “frequently out of balance,”⁴²⁴ and the sound system “hissed and popped,”⁴²⁵ but sound design quality in Broadway musical theatre has developed systematically since then and today is comparable to that inside a recording studio. As Alan Stieb saw it in 1988, “Today’s people are watching lots of television and they’re expecting amplified sound.”⁴²⁶ Thus, above all, amplification serves to satisfy the audience’s expectations.

Nevertheless, amplification in Broadway musical theatre remains a point of discussion and “one of the more intensely debated additions to the modern musical.”⁴²⁷ According to Bill Merrill, using the body mike as “reinforcement, not amplification,”⁴²⁸ allowed “unique talents like Rudy Vallee in the original ‘How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying’ to ‘blend in’ with stronger voices.”⁴²⁹ Michael Starobin shows ambivalence towards the technology when he states that “the more technical a show gets, the more it imitates a movie and so it is not cashing in on its strengths. … This can kill the live quality of theatre, which is what distinguishes theatre from film.”⁴³⁰ However, Stieb is confident that “at this point, there is no doubt: microphones are not going to go away.”⁴³¹ Thus, amplification is the logical consequence of audio-technical development – and to be a blessing and a curse at the same time.

While the changing aesthetics of Broadway musical theatre made amplification necessary, the invention of body-miking had its own influence on this aesthetics and, as might be expected, on Broadway belting. Contrary to Fred Ebb and John Kander, who lamented that, since turning on the foot mikes, “it’s been downhill all the way from

⁴²⁴ Ibid. 221.

⁴²⁵ Ibid.

⁴²⁶ Alan Stieb, cited by Michael Kimmelman, “Amplification: Making It All Clear,” *The New York Times*, no. September 3 (1988), <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/09/03/theater/amplification-making-it-all-clear.html>.

⁴²⁷ Ibid.

⁴²⁸ Bill Merrill, “Sound in the Theater; Amplification Run Amok,” *The New York Times*, no. June 30, 1996 (1996).

⁴²⁹ Ibid.

⁴³⁰ Kimmelman, “Amplification: Making It All Clear”.

⁴³¹ Ibid.

that moment,”⁴³² I would argue that amplification *improved* belting, and would suggest that even the development of belting as a singing style was influenced by amplification.

When the first wireless microphones came into use, the devices were basically meant to reinforce the vocal abilities of singers and actors. As Bill Merrill describes, “The trick was to balance the wired performer with the rest of the cast so the audience did not know that he was miked.”⁴³³ However, singers like Merman were proud of their loud voices and did not want to be amplified: Merman refused to accept foot mikes in *Gypsy*, and the day Jule Styne decided to turn the foot mikes on in favor of a blended overall sound, Merman was at first not informed to avoid her getting angry.⁴³⁴ She was *old school* and for her, amplification concerned loudness, nothing else. Although her voice might not have needed amplification, the *sound balance* of the complete cast made amplification necessary, even for her. With these changes, the loudness of the belt voice became less important, while the belt sound and the belter’s idiosyncratic timbre, as epitomized by Merman, have remained crucial for every Broadway Belt to follow.

At the beginning of the growing demand for performers to be triple threats, mainly sparked by *A Chorus Line*, body mikes simply supported the performers, especially the singing and acting dancers. Although they generally needed to wear body mikes to be heard, they still kept their original vocal sound and loudness. However, in the era of rock musicals, shows became louder as a whole and, as put forth by Grant, “The use of the belt voice devolved into a raucous exploitation of its vocal timbre instead of a means to make lyrics clearer and enhance the through-line of the character.”⁴³⁵ Serendipitously, this blasting amplification in the development of Broadway musical theatre was only temporary. However, the choice of a belt voice now remained mainly

⁴³² Lawrence O’Toole, “Theater; Musical Theater is Discovering a New Voice,” *The New York Times*, no. January 22 (1995): <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/01/22/theater/theater-musical-theater-is-discovering-a-new-voice.html>.

⁴³³ Merrill, “Sound in the Theater; Amplification Run Amok.”

⁴³⁴ O’Toole, “Theater; Musical Theater is Discovering a New Voice.”

⁴³⁵ Grant, *The Rise and Fall of the Broadway Musical*. 39.

dependent on the belt voice's timbre, and the voice's loudness, à la Mer-man, was no longer necessary.

Broadway belting continues its evolution with the assistance of body miking. As Chris Latham sees it, "The microphone is essentially an ear which places you at the point where the microphone is situated. It allows the listener to get closer to the action and to hear the detail within the sound – the kind of tonal grain that simply does not carry in a large hall."⁴³⁶ Like Barthes, Latham considers the grain of the voice as the most crucial part of a belt voice (even though their understanding of "grain" might not exactly be the same). Both are right, but it is crucial to mention Merrill's position that "a body mike can't improve a live performance"⁴³⁷ and "dynamics and shading are the core of a performance and are nearly impossible to achieve with a body mike."⁴³⁸ Thus, it is still the performer who is responsible for the vocal sound and the subtleties of a song's interpretation. Indeed, in the beginning, body miking was a nightmare for many prominent voices, since early body mikes had feedback problems, and the belter's high tones often became cut due to technical problems. As Stacy Wolf states, "the presence of audio technology necessarily affected the role and labor of the actor,"⁴³⁹ and "technology eliminated the actor's freedom to control her volume and to modulate the aural space she could occupy at any one time."⁴⁴⁰ As a matter of fact, Broadway performers occasionally still complain about amplification. "We have no control over how we sound ... projecting or not projecting,"⁴⁴¹ confirms a self-declared Broadway performer tagged as "Not_a_fan" on *TalkingBroadway.com*. "If it's going into the board, the way it comes through depends on whoever's designing/running it."⁴⁴² Not_a_fan continues, commenting "about the absence of singer's voices

⁴³⁶ Chris Latham, "How the Microphone Transformed the Music World," *Limelight - Australia's Classical Music and Arts Magazine*, no. November 15 (2015), <https://www.limelightmagazine.com.au/features/how-the-microphone-transformed-the-music-world/>.

⁴³⁷ Merrill, "Sound in the Theater; Amplification Run Amok."

⁴³⁸ Ibid.

⁴³⁹ Wolf, *Changed for Good – A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*. Pos 2863.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid. Pos. 2875.

⁴⁴¹ Backstage, "Assessing Amplification," Backstage, accessed March 10, 2020. <https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/assessing-amplification-46169/>.

⁴⁴² Ibid.

on stage monitors and how that can lead to incorrect singing, because the actor can't hear him- or herself.”⁴⁴³ Vocal coaches Peter Van Derick and Mary Setrakian confirm the problem of possible *oversinging* when singers can't hear themselves.⁴⁴⁴ Additionally, the audience is not always satisfied. Someone tagged as “Touring SM” recounts being disappointed after an *A Chorus Line* performance: “I had a great seat, and the orchestra didn't sound 'live' at all. And now, with the advancement of microphones placed on the actor's person, the energy of the vocals is lost.”⁴⁴⁵

There was probably a time when “in terms of things like endurance and projection, standards … certainly dropped,”⁴⁴⁶ as Keith Herman opined in 1988. Nevertheless, I cannot subscribe to Wolf's point of view that “a successful musical theatre actor no longer [has] to develop the technique and skill of projection, and even actors with quiet voices [can] be stars on the megamusical's stage.”⁴⁴⁷ At least, this cannot be true for a Broadway Belt. When Betty Buckley as Grizabella in *Cats* belts out, “Touch me, it's so easy to leave me,”⁴⁴⁸ at the end of “Memory,” she *is* projecting, and it is the *grain of her voice* that touches the hearts of the audience. Thus, the possibility to reach an audience with the emotional quality of the belt voice has improved through amplification. As *Wicked*'s part of Elphaba shows, a Broadway Belt still needs to project the voice in a song like “Defying Gravity.” Contrary to Merman, who projected *every* tone in *every* song to be heard, Menzel has the possibility (and the capability) to show Elphaba's emotional state in “I'm Not That Girl” by singing softly. With technical progress bringing body mikes to a high level of quality, the technology became the belter's friend: It allows the singer to belt out tones, but then immediately to revert to whispering or singing softly in favor of a role's characterization. Consequently, the emotional quality of the belt voice has improved through body miking, and uniformity can be avoided.

⁴⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁶ Keith Herman cit. in Kimmelman, “Amplification: Making It All Clear”.

⁴⁴⁷ Wolf, *Changed for Good – A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*. Pos. 2875.

⁴⁴⁸ This line is the beginning of the last verse of the song “Memory” in *Cats* by Andrew Lloyd Webber.

Broadway actress Elaine Stritch did “not like mikes”⁴⁴⁹ and stated that “it’s hard to accept change.”⁴⁵⁰ “It’s not just the actual projection of sound,” she continued, “it’s also the art of reaching an audience. A stage whisper isn’t a low sound projected necessarily; it’s a sound that says you have a secret. Mikes do tend to destroy that kind of projection.”⁴⁵¹ Nevertheless, sound design has improved and even Stritch had to accommodate and confess that “if you join forces with the monster, it can be a very positive thing.”⁴⁵²

To confirm that belters of the 21st century are still able to project without amplification, it is worth referring to the concert series *Broadway by the Year* and especially its spin-off, called *Broadway Unplugged*. In each concert of producer Scott Siegel’s 2000 series, about six songs were sung off-mike.⁴⁵³ Siegel raved at the time that these songs “invariably stop the show,”⁴⁵⁴ adding, “not only does the audience clearly love to hear songs performed this way, the singers love doing it, as well.”⁴⁵⁵ Four years later, in 2004, the spin-off concert, *Broadway Unplugged*, was entirely off-mike.⁴⁵⁶ As the listing of performers for each concert between 2004 and 2019 shows, the *Annual Broadway Unplugged* concert has presented many Broadway performers, especially elite Broadway belters, unamplified on stage. According to Siegel, performers take part enthusiastically. He explains, “One reason that many of the performers are so eager to appear is that they are all trained to do this, but aren’t offered the opportunity.”⁴⁵⁷ Nevertheless, Siegel does not “expect to change the direction of sound design on Broadway with a show like

⁴⁴⁹ O’Toole, “Theater; Musical Theater is Discovering a New Voice.”

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid.

⁴⁵² Ibid.

⁴⁵³ Matthew Murray, “No Microphones Allowed: Broadway Unplugged Concert Set for September 27 at The Town Hall,” *Theatermania.com Inc.*, no. June 25 (2004), https://www.theatermania.com/new-york-city-theater/news/no-microphones-allowed-broadway-unplugged-concert-_4866.html.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁶ Stephen Holden, “Theater: This Week; Broadway Bares the Human Voice,” *The New York Times*, no. Sept. 26 (2004): <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/26/theater/newsandfeatures/broadway-bares-the-human-voice.html>.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid.

this”⁴⁵⁸ and cautions, “Don’t expect Broadway to suddenly throw its microphones away.”⁴⁵⁹ In any case, the concert series is expected to live on for the foreseeable future, proving that amplification did not and will not destroy the Broadway musical theatre – and especially not the vocal abilities of the Broadway Belt.

Today’s sound design has developed to the point that it has become part of the show. For example, in *Hamilton*, the sound design “brilliantly complements Miranda’s vivid portrait of the Caribbean immigrant Hamilton,”⁴⁶⁰ states Sam Gustin. According to Salzman and Dési, “the esthetic of amplified sound has itself become part of the musical sound of certain composers and styles,”⁴⁶¹ which is entirely the case for *Hamilton*. As Nevin Steinberg states:

The whole point is to help people focus on what to listen to and guide them through the story. So when the material has that kind of dynamic range, sound designers get to see how far we can go. Lin likes to say that *Hamilton* is the *loudest and quietest show* on Broadway. We really have worked to the very edges of loud moments and quiet moments in a Broadway theater, in service of telling a story that is full of chaos and violence and enthusiasm, and also full of quiet introspection.⁴⁶²

Michael Kimmelman is undoubtedly right when he says that “people don’t want to have to work at hearing the actor,”⁴⁶³ but this is not due to a “passive, even lethargic listening by an audience.”⁴⁶⁴ Steinberg states that “human beings’ ears are incredibly sensitive and they connect directly to emotional centers and mood centers and centers of upset and centers

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁹ Murray, “No Microphones Allowed: Broadway Unplugged Concert Set for September 27 at The Town Hall”.

⁴⁶⁰ Sam Gustin, “‘Hamilton’ Is Revolutionizing the Art and Science of Broadway Sound Design,” *Motherboard – Tech by Vice*, no. June 10 (2016), https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/mg73pq/hamilton-is-revolutionizing-the-art-and-science-of-broadway-sound-design.

⁴⁶¹ Salzman and Dési, *The New Music Theater – Seeing the Voice, Hearing the Body*. 26.

⁴⁶² Gustin, “‘Hamilton’ Is Revolutionizing the Art and Science of Broadway Sound Design”.

⁴⁶³ Kimmelman, “Amplification: Making It All Clear”.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid.

of peace and quiet.”⁴⁶⁵ Hence, a belt voice’s emotional quality is more important than its natural loudness.

The question was raised at the beginning of this section, to what extent is a belt voice nature’s gift, and to what extent the result of vocal technique? I concede that today’s belting needs vocal technique more than ever, but it is neither pure *Bel canto* technique nor a unique belting approach. The belt sound of a voice is mainly defined through the voice’s timbre, and amplification improves the belt voice’s emotional quality in favor of the role’s interpretation and telling the story. The knowledge of how to use their voices in accordance with sound design is, even for *natural* belters, more critical than in the early years of Broadway musical theatre because Broadway belting is not just singing loud anymore. Nevertheless, roles for belt voices contain demanding parts in which the ability to project remains crucial. Voice teachers can *assist* belters to achieve the necessary flexibility in their voices and to achieve the belt sound if their teaching is based on belt voice research and physiological and pedagogical knowledge about belting. However, this assistance can only support the belter to create an *individual* belt sound, thanks to her natural timbre. Every belter has to find the grain of her *own* voice to become a Broadway Belt. To support my assessment, the next chapter will concentrate on the discourse of Broadway belters about their personal experiences in developing their belt voices, especially regarding the growing exigencies in acting and dancing as a consequence of the changing landscape of Broadway musical theatre.

2.4 The Broadway Belt – A Singer, an Actress, a Dancer

After arguing different points of view about what a belt voice is, should be and sounds like, it is crucial to explore those who are using it: The Broadway belters. Since no clear definition of belting exists, neither in voice research nor in vocal pedagogy, it is consequently difficult to define what is necessary to become recognized as a belter, especially as

⁴⁶⁵ Gustin, “Hamilton’ Is Revolutionizing the Art and Science of Broadway Sound Design”.

a Broadway Belt. At the beginning of their careers, the objective of the 20th century's elite belters on Broadway was, first of all, to become successful in their specialties: Some were already strong singers and started their career in clubs and bars before becoming a Broadway Belt, specialized in delivering the greatest showstoppers in Broadway musical history. Others were character actresses, chosen by the creative team to give a role's interpretation more psychological depth than a singer alone could have done. These actresses usually had to learn how to project a song or even how to sing a song at all. Last but not least, there were elite dancers who captured the audience more with their body language than through their voice, and who were coached to sing and act, or just talented enough to deliver a song while dancing.

The criteria I chose for my selection of Broadway belters are: 1) having belted out as a leading lady in a Broadway musical – with public recognition, through comments and critics – and 2) being a Tony Award winner or nominee in the category “Best Performance by a Leading Actress in a Musical.”⁴⁶⁶ Additionally, for my discourse analysis, I will categorize performers based on the evolution from singers to singing actresses to triple threats. By foregrounding the problem of belting in combination with acting and dancing in the context of the interpretation of a role, I decided to structure this chapter after the belter’s leading talent, singing, acting, or dancing, and to include these individualized groups in my corpus of statements. This point of view allows me to explore the relationship between belting and acting, and belting, acting, and dancing, before examining the Broadway Belt outside the vocal aspects of belting in the subsequent chapter.

It was as early as the 1930s that belting became the vocal standard for a Broadway musical performer, at least in *jazzier* musicals, like those of leading composers as George Gershwin, Cole Porter, and Irving Berlin. As mentioned, through Gershwin’s *Girl Crazy*, Ethel Merman became “the very definition of a Broadway Belter.”⁴⁶⁷ Considered by the *New*

⁴⁶⁶ The name of the Tony Award category shows the general importance of acting in Broadway musical even as early as 1948, the first year this prize was awarded.

⁴⁶⁷ Thomas S. Hischak, *Through the Screendoor – What Happened to the Broadway Musical When it Went to Hollywood* (Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrowpress, Inc., 2004). 65.

York Times critic Lewis Nicols to be “heaven’s gift to the musical show,”⁴⁶⁸ Merman was crowned “the First Lady of the Broadway musical” and “kept this title for 40 years.”⁴⁶⁹ Merman was clearly conscious of the impact of her belt voice on the development of Broadway musical theatre when she stated in 1983 that “Broadway has been very good to me – but then I’ve been very good to Broadway.”⁴⁷⁰ Over the long period of Merman’s leadership in Broadway musical history, Broadway musical theatre became irreversibly connected with belting, and Merman’s contemporaries and successors had to keep up the vocal standard she had set. She had created a new leading-lady image for the genre.⁴⁷¹

Nevertheless, acting became an essential requirement for a Broadway musical performer in the 1940s, when Broadway musical theatre changed from *musical comedies*, with a revue character, to book musicals, developing into the much more dramatic *musical play* and *musical drama*.⁴⁷² Dancing was a part of Broadway shows since the beginning of musical theatre, but, as said, it was only from 1957, with *West Side Story*, that the genre saw a requirement for leading characters who also had to be strong singers, especially belters.

Although it is the goal of every Broadway Belt ever since to maintain the belt sound while acting and dancing, it is crucial to pay tribute to Broadway musical theatre’s changing aesthetics, cultural and economic crises, and their influence on the genre’s development,⁴⁷³ and the intrusion of mega- and corporate musicals. My discursive analysis of female musical performers who were primarily singers, actresses, or dancers

⁴⁶⁸ Ben Brantley, *Broadway Musicals – From the Pages of The New York Times* (New York: Abrams Books, 2012), 112.

⁴⁶⁹ The Grove Dictionary of American Music. Eight vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013², s.v. “Merman [Zimmermann], Ethel (Agnes).” 456.

⁴⁷⁰ Schumach, “Ethel Merman, Queen of Musicals, Dies at 76.”

⁴⁷¹ Stempel, *Showtime – A History of the Broadway Musical Theater*. 416.

⁴⁷² Ibid. 291–295.

⁴⁷³ With “cultural and economic crises and the influence on the genre’s development” I refer especially to satirical musicals during the Great Depression and World War II, when the Broadway musical took positions with political criticism and satirical and ironical interpretations, and influenced American society about social, racial, and political injustice. For example, *Strike Up the Band* by George S. Kaufman and George and Ira Gershwin, and *Of Thee I Sing* by Kaufman and Morris Ryskind, followed by *Lady in the Dark* by Kurt Weill, Moss Hart, and Ira Gershwin.

will concentrate on the attribution of the title Broadway Belt, with a view to the main talent of the respective performer.

2.4.1 Belting and Acting

The myth about Merman's unique, naturally loud voice misguided the understanding of belting as “just singing loudly” for many years. Even if Merman's voice was considered to be ear-opening,⁴⁷⁴ loudness was not the main factor. Gerald Bordman states that “actually, there were a number of singers with bigger and better voices. What Miss Merman really had was impeccable diction and superb projection.”⁴⁷⁵ According to Howard Goldstein, “most remarkably, since she claimed to have never taken a singing lesson in her life, she had “an instinctive gift for phrasing with beautifully controlled *diminuendi* at phrase ends,”⁴⁷⁶ and “an unerring sense of rhythm and pitch.”⁴⁷⁷ Cole Porter called her voice “thrilling”⁴⁷⁸ and said that “she has the finest enunciation of any American singer I know. She has a sense of rhythm few can equal … And she is so damned apt.”⁴⁷⁹ Merman explained in her biography that her self-confidence came from talent, not from arrogance. “Even if I don't know how I get the effects I end up with, I do have sense enough to know that I do all right. I'd be a dope if I didn't know that. I'd be even dopier if I changed the way I do it.”⁴⁸⁰ Merman obviously followed her instincts as a talented *natural singer* and set new standards in vocal power, diction, and projection, thus defining the term Broadway Belt – at least as long as *singing* was the most crucial element in a Broadway show.

With the changing aesthetics of Broadway musical theatre, Merman and her successors were challenged to *act* and, accordingly, to become *acting singers*. When Angela Lansbury auditioned for *Mame*, Jerry Hermann considered Lansbury's voice to be “very raw,”⁴⁸¹ but he

⁴⁷⁴ Mordden, *Broadway Babies – The People Who Made The American Musical*. 115.

⁴⁷⁵ Bordman, *American Musical Theatre: A Chronicle*. 514.

⁴⁷⁶ s.v. “Merman [Zimmermann], Ethel (Agnes).” 457.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁸ Stempel, *Showtime – A History of the Broadway Musical Theater*. 271.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁰ Schumach, “Ethel Merman, Queen of Musicals, Dies at 76.”

⁴⁸¹ Gottfried, *Balancing Act – The Authorized Biography of Angela Lansbury*. 155.

recognized instinctively that “she had a real instrument.”⁴⁸² Herman adapted to the actress, “chang[ing] keys to fit more comfortably into her range.”⁴⁸³ Lansbury originated the part of Mame as a *singing actress* and, thus, could not be compared to a singer. When she was asked to play Rose in a revival of *Gypsy*, she first turned the offer down by saying, “I can’t sing that role. *I can’t sing like Ethel Merman.*”⁴⁸⁴ However, she finally accepted and, being conscious about not having a singing voice like Merman, she cashed in on being a *trained character actress* in this part and became successful as such. She even emphasizes that “the original Rose [Ethel Merman] was not an actress, so she was singing about herself … What I brought was my total understanding of the character, as a character actress.”⁴⁸⁵ Merman also described the part of Rose in the 1959 production of *Gypsy* as her “most demanding moment in the theater.”⁴⁸⁶ Nevertheless, Merman considered the part primarily “like an opera to sing.”⁴⁸⁷ She portrayed Rose, first of all, as a *singer*, and the audience came primarily to see – and to hear – “La Merman”⁴⁸⁸ in her new star vehicle, not the new show.⁴⁸⁹

In the era of *Gypsy*’s first revival, a big Broadway belt voice had not lost its fascination, but it was not as crucial as before. “You want someone to do both, of course,” Stephen Sondheim states, “but if I have to lean on one element, I would lean more towards the acting, because I’m much more concerned with telling the story than I am with the enjoyment of the singing.”⁴⁹⁰ Consequently, once the creatives had chosen the actress who fit the role, most of them compromised about the

⁴⁸² Ibid.

⁴⁸³ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid. 219.

⁴⁸⁵ Mark Peikert, “Angela Lansbury Reflects on Her Performance of ‘Rose’s Turn’ in *Gypsy*,” *Playbill*, no. September 23 (2019), <http://www.playbill.com/article/angela-lansbury-reflects-on-her-performance-of-roses-turn-in-gypsy>.

⁴⁸⁶ Schumach, “Ethel Merman, Queen of Musicals, Dies at 76.”

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁸ Cole Porter frequently referred to Ethel Merman as *La Merman*; see William McBrien, *Cole Porter* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf (Random House Inc.), 1998). 165.

⁴⁸⁹ Certainly, Lansbury’s audience also came to see the movie celebrity and star of *Mame*, but in Merman’s case the audience had come to see Merman for 40 years already.

⁴⁹⁰ Stephen Sondheim, interview by Library of Congress, 2017. <http://www.loc.gov/static/programs/national-recording-preservation-board/documents/SondheimInterview.pdf>.

singing voice. Elaine Stritch considered herself to be “just shouting”⁴⁹¹ in the 1970’s rehearsals for Stephen Sondheim’s *Company*. According to Playbill’s obituary, “her bitter, hilarious, roaring rendition of the furiously regretful song ‘The Ladies Who Lunch’ in that show remains one of the most iconic musical moments in Broadway history, and the stage performance for which she is perhaps best remembered.”⁴⁹² After skipping college and attending the Dramatic Workshop of New York City’s New School at the age of seventeen,⁴⁹³ Stritch caught the part as stand-by for “the chronically healthy Ethel Merman”⁴⁹⁴ in *Call Me Madam*,⁴⁹⁵ freely admitting to having a “technically imperfect singing voice.”⁴⁹⁶ Stritch quickly became considered to be a *natural*, using her “sandpaper voice”⁴⁹⁷ to interpret each song as a “one-act play in musical form.”⁴⁹⁸ Even Lee Strasberg refused to teach her, saying “Elaine, you were born with The Method.”⁴⁹⁹ Highly recognized by composers like Sondheim, as well as playwrights, colleagues, and fans, it was as late as in 2002, after four Tony nominations, that Stritch received, at last, the “Tony Award for Best Special Theatrical Event” for her one-woman show *Elaine Stritch at Liberty*, at the age of 77.⁵⁰⁰ However, she never received a Tony for the Best Performance by a Leading Actress in a Musical – even though she was widely recognized as an exceptional Broadway Belt. Nevertheless, her rendition of “I’m Still Here” from Sondheim’s *Follies* (at the age of 85), at Sondheim’s 80th Birthday Concert,⁵⁰¹ unquestionably underlines her unique talents.

⁴⁹¹ Mark Lawson, “Elaine Stritch Obituary,” *The Guardian*, no. July 17 (2014), <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/jul/17/elaine-stritch>.

⁴⁹² Playbill, “Elaine Stritch Obituary,” accessed October 6, 2019. <http://www.playbill.com/person/view-more?person=oooo0150-ac7c-d16d-a550-ec7efc080005>.

⁴⁹³ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁴ Regrettably, Stritch never got the chance to replace Merman; see ibid.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁶ Lawson, “Elaine Stritch Obituary”.

⁴⁹⁷ Playbill, “Elaine Stritch Obituary”.

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁰ Robert Simonson, “Elaine Stritch Upset by Shortened Acceptance Speech,” *Playbill*, no. June 3 (2002), <http://www.playbill.com/article/elaine-stritch-upset-by-shortened-acceptance-speech-com-106247>.

⁵⁰¹ I’m Still Here – Elaine Stritch, posted by “Mike Hipp,” May 13, 2012. (YouTube: Google LLC), 6:13, <https://youtu.be/3Xz1TUGdG6A>.

Like Stritch, Carol Channing always preferred to speak about the *character* she was portraying. “My job is like a revue artist,” she said, “you jump from character to character and you don’t recognize me from one character to another. That’s my talent.”⁵⁰² A school band’s vocalist at the age of twelve, her vocation was acting,⁵⁰³ and the only passage in her biography about her singing voice mentions her last six months at Northwestern University when she took lessons with Hope Miller, the opera singing teacher.⁵⁰⁴ “I learned all I know about singing from her,” Channing declared; “I found out from Hope, singing correctly is a cinch. But musical comedy people want to sing like the character, at least I do.”⁵⁰⁵ This *singing like the character* differentiates her from the leading ladies mentioned before: For Channing, singing was not a vocal expression *outside* the character, necessary for the portrayal because a composer and lyricist had written a song; Channing portrayed a *singing character*. It was not Channing singing in *Hello, Dolly!*, it was Channing portraying a singing Dolly. She always considered performing as work: “If you are enjoying it yourself no one else does. It’s like the old adage: if you start listening to your own voice you can bet that no one else is. Same with acting. Anything. Start watching your own performance and no one else is.”⁵⁰⁶ This attitude might be the reason she successfully played Dolly over 5000 times all over the world,⁵⁰⁷ and on Broadway until the age of 75.⁵⁰⁸ This number of shows portraying the same part was certainly unusual for a musical written a long time before megamusicals with eight shows per week became a common occurrence. Thus Chan-

502 Carol Channing cit. in Eddie Shapiro, *Nothing Like A Dame – Conversations with the Great Women of Musical Theater* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). Pos. 649.

503 Ibid. Pos. 543.

504 Carol Channing, *Just Lucky I Guess – A Memoir of Sorts* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 37.

505 Ibid.

506 Carol Channing cit. in Shapiro, *Nothing Like A Dame – Conversations with the Great Women of Musical Theater*. Pos. 788.

507 Chris Wiegand, “Carol Channing, Star of Hello, Dolly! On Broadway, Dies Aged 97,” *The Guardian*, no. January 15 (2019), <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2019/jan/15/carol-channing-star-of-hello-dolly-on-broadway-dies-aged-97>.

508 The Broadway League, “Carol Channing,” accessed October 29, 2019. <https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-cast-staff/carol-channing-35029>.

ning might be seen as the first Broadway Belt whose job title could be considered to be *musical performer*.

When the megamusical *Cats* boomed on Broadway, one of this new subgenre's first belting stars was Betty Buckley. The "celebrated voice of Broadway"⁵⁰⁹ had taken dance lessons since the age of three and knew early in her life that she "had this big voice."⁵¹⁰ Taking her acting into account, Buckley represents the typical *musical performer* with high-quality abilities in singing, acting, and dancing, even if she never portrayed a role in a dance musical on Broadway.⁵¹¹ Nevertheless, she emphasizes being an actress when she declares, "That's the most interesting thing about being an actor: the commitment to the craft. ... You need to take into account what your gifts are and what you need to work on about yourself. It takes a lot of discipline and a lot of hard work. To be a great actor is a lifetime commitment."⁵¹²

Lifetime commitment is certainly something Patti LuPone would underline without restrictions. Trained to be a dramatic actress, LuPone's success in *Evita* in 1979 made her primarily recognized as a Broadway Belt for her *singing* with her so-called "once-in-a-generation pipes."⁵¹³ While portraying Eva Perón in *Evita* catapulted her into Broadway stardom, it became also her most challenging experience when she temporarily lost her voice.⁵¹⁴ "*Evita* was the worst experience of my life," she said. "I was screaming my way through a part that could only have been written by a man who hates women."⁵¹⁵ Nevertheless, she was quickly a critical success: Taking over a part that Merman had originated, Reno

⁵⁰⁹ Jordan Rife, "Betty Buckley Reflects on Joining the Long Line of Legendary Dolly Levis," *The Hollywood Reporter*, no. January 25 (2019), <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/betty-buckley-reflects-joining-long-line-legendary-dolly-levis-1179283>.

⁵¹⁰ Betty Buckley cit. in Shapiro, *Nothing Like A Dame – Conversations with the Great Women of Musical Theater*. Pos. 3028.

⁵¹¹ The Broadway League, "Betty Buckley," accessed March 12, 2020. <https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-cast-staff/betty-buckley-33550>.

⁵¹² Betty Buckley cit. in Shapiro, *Nothing Like A Dame – Conversations with the Great Women of Musical Theater*. Pos. 3163.

⁵¹³ Jesse Green, "Let Her Entertain You, Please!," *The New York Times*, no. July 8 (2007), <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/08/theater/08gree.html>.

⁵¹⁴ Hadley Freeman, "Print that! Broadway Legend Patti LuPone Sounds Off," *The Guardian*, no. October 11 (2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/oct/11/print-that-broadway-legend-patti-lupone-sounds-off>.

⁵¹⁵ Patti LuPone cit. in Green, "Let Her Entertain You, Please!".

Sweeney, in the 1988 revival of *Anything Goes*, Frank Rich declared that “Patti LuPone is the top … Ms. LuPone’s Reno is a mature, uninhibited jazz dame: loose, trashy, funny, sexy. Ethel Merman she’s not … but who is?”⁵¹⁶ LuPone did not get the chance to play Berlin’s *Annie Get Your Gun*, another of Merman’s biggest successes, but stepped again into Merman’s footsteps in the revival of *Gypsy* in 2008.⁵¹⁷ She also achieved critical acclaim as Mrs. Lovett in the 2005–2006 revival of *Sweeney Todd*, when she took over one of Lansbury’s Tony-Award-winning parts.⁵¹⁸

Although LuPone and Buckley are definitively recognized Broadway belters of the second generation, Jesse Green writes about LuPone being born too late to enjoy the advantages of Merman’s era.⁵¹⁹ The time when Merman became *the Broadway Belt* was the time “when musical roles that tapped all those extremes were regularly written, and when producers accommodated the quirks of the stars who could embody them.”⁵²⁰ When Cole Porter admitted that he would “rather write songs for Ethel Merman than anyone else in the world,”⁵²¹ he stressed writing *songs*, not musical roles. In the era of Merman’s beginnings, the dramatic content of the show stood behind the star singer’s showstoppers. However, there was not much exciting content in these musicals anyway. Laurence Maslon writes about Porter’s 1934 hit musical *Anything Goes*, that it “proved to be a carefree tonic for Depression-weary audiences.”⁵²² Along the same lines, Stempel points out:

Ultimately, musical comedy was not dramatic literature but a performative arena for Porter and his librettists: a meeting ground for actors, comedians, singers, dancers, and songs. A book provided the occasion; and a song served as the blueprint for a performance that was tied to the book rather than as an enhancement of the book itself.⁵²³

⁵¹⁶ Sacks, “She’s the Top.”

⁵¹⁷ Green, “Let Her Entertain You, Please!”.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid.

⁵¹⁹ Ibid.

⁵²⁰ Ibid.

⁵²¹ Merman and Eells, *Merman*. 9.

⁵²² Maslon, *Broadway – The American Musical*. 138.

⁵²³ Stempel, *Showtime – A History of the Broadway Musical Theater*. 270.

Since the story of these musicals was not dramatic, the audience was satisfied when Merman “just stood there and sent it over.”⁵²⁴ However from 1959 on, with *Gypsy*, this was not enough anymore for a Broadway Belt to impress the audience. Thus, to maintain her career, Merman was excited to be given a chance to *act* in *Gypsy*. Even though she was not a trained actress, the combination of the belt voice that the audience was always waiting for with her effort to act in the role of Rose, brought her career another major success. In contrast, 15 years later, Lansbury, the actress, had to be coached to *sing* for her portrayal of Rose in *Gypsy*'s first revival. Lansbury could only become a musical performer, because of her musical ear and sufficient natural talent in singing. Even though she was highly praised for her rendition of the character Rose, Lansbury recognized that “there is much more of the entertainer in the musical theater performer than there is in the actor.”⁵²⁵ Thus, in its combination of singing and acting, the portrayal of a musical role needs more than dramatic acting skills or a belt voice; it demands an overall performance that is primarily destined to entertain the audience.

When amplification reached Broadway musical theatre, diction and projection remained crucial, but, as said, the naturally loud voice – like Merman's – lost its importance. Undoubtedly, this is at least one reason why singers with smaller voices, and actresses in general, could become recognized Broadway belters. The ability to sing loudly is nature's gift, even if vocal technique can help to reinforce the voice. Sondheim's wish to find “someone to do both” (as mentioned) cannot always be fulfilled. Therefore, the importance of acting in Broadway musical theatre brought the fraternal-twin dilemmas of singers with little acting ability and actresses with small singing voices.

Since the newly established aesthetics of Broadway musical theatre did not allow for turning back time, only the introduction of microphones in Broadway musical theatre made it possible to adapt the aesthetics of belting to those of Broadway musical plays and dramas. As Oskar Eustis states, “amplification is a tool that allows far greater range

⁵²⁴ Mordden, *Broadway Babies – The People Who Made The American Musical*. 115.

⁵²⁵ Angela Lansbury cit. in Gottfried, *Balancing Act – The Authorized Biography of Angela Lansbury*. 135.

and expressiveness to our actors than would otherwise be possible.”⁵²⁶ Hence, for many singers and actresses, belting out a song in a Broadway musical role became possible only through amplification; otherwise, only *singers* (or singer/actresses) with comparable vocal qualities to Merman’s could have continued the history of Broadway belting. However, LuPone objects to an overreliance on the microphone, particularly for young singers.⁵²⁷ “How could a singer learn the possibilities of his or her voice if there is the crutch of amplification?” asks LuPone. “The ability ‘to sing out,’ or to be able to fill an auditorium with the human voice, stripped down to its purest but most resounding tone, is a learned skill.”⁵²⁸ It is notable here that LuPone suggests that actresses should *learn* to sing out: Although Merman’s natural belt voice remains iconic, belting has become a skill which is, at least partially, possible to be learned.

Although the term Broadway Belt is largely recognized to include singing actresses and triple threats, the heritage of the singer Merman remains sacrosanct. Amplification did not and does not stop creative teams or audiences from expecting a musical performer to possess as much belt voice as possible. To name just a few, songs like “The Winner Takes It All” from *Mamma Mia* (1999),⁵²⁹ “I’m Here” from *The Color Purple* (2004), “Diva’s Lament (Whatever Happened To My Part?)” from *Spamalot* (2005), “So Much Better” from *Legally Blonde* (2007), “Breathe” from *In the Heights* (2008), “Sal Tlay Ka Siti” from *The Book of Mormon* (2011), “Back on Top” from *War Paint* (2016), “World Burn” from *Mean Girls* (2017), and “The Lady’s Improving” from *The Prom* (2018) are highly demanding belt songs. Those singers cast for these parts are *certainly* projecting and belting their hearts out, without failing the part’s character.

Learned skill or natural talent, musical performers include great natural singers as much as great actresses, trained or naturally talented. The

⁵²⁶ Deena; Kaye and James LeBrecht, *Sound and Music for the Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 2015). xxv.

⁵²⁷ Patti LuPone cit. in Imaan Jalali, “Patti LuPone Excels as Masterclass ‘Professor’ at Wallis Annenberg Center,” *LAexcites*, no. April 6 (2016), <https://laexcites.com/2016/04/08/patti-lupone-excels-as-masterclass-professor-at-wallis-annenberg-center/>.

⁵²⁸ Ibid.

⁵²⁹ Year the show premiered on Broadway.

attribute *Broadway Belt* remains reserved for the most iconic of them with the *best combination* of belting and acting in the respective leading role. As if this double asset is not enough, Broadway's *dance musicals* demand leading ladies not only to belt out and to act but also to dance. The double threat becomes a triple threat.

2.4.2 The Triple Threat

Contrary to the movies, “All Talking! All Singing! All Dancing!”⁵³⁰ was nothing new in Broadway musical theatre at the end of the 1920s. However, according to Stempel, “it took most of the first half of the twentieth century to develop a characteristic Broadway dance style of some distinction.”⁵³¹ For a better understanding of the evolution of dancing in Broadway musical theatre and the growing importance of the triple threat, a short retrospect in the history of Broadway musical choreography is necessary.

Until the 1930s, dancing in Broadway musicals functioned as an embellishment of the show and, when present, was created by the show's *dance director*.⁵³² The formation of dance numbers, called *musical staging*, was defined rather uninspiringly as “moving singers, dancers, and actors around the stage in a musical number.”⁵³³ The term *choreographer* appeared for the first time in 1936 when George Balanchine demanded billing as choreographer for his work on Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart's *On Your Toes*.⁵³⁴ However, this was not yet Broadway dancing, since dances in Broadway musicals at that time were “discrete, not ongoing; their purpose energizing, not narrative.”⁵³⁵ With the development of the book musical, which *integrated* song and dance into the story, the

⁵³⁰ This was the advertisement slogan for *The Broadway Melody* in 1929 by Metro Goldwyn Mayer, the first feature-length sound film musical, only two years after *The Jazz Singer*, the first feature-length talking picture ever. See Stanley Green, *Hollywood Musicals Year By Year* (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard Corporation, 1999).5. Steven Cohan, ed. *Hollywood Musicals, The Film Reader* (London: Routledge, 2002). 3.

⁵³¹ Stempel, *Showtime – A History of the Broadway Musical Theater*. 559.

⁵³² Ibid. 560.

⁵³³ Ibid.

⁵³⁴ Ibid.

⁵³⁵ Ibid. 561.

term “choreography” received a new meaning. Agnes de Mille invented the *narrative dance* and preferred dancers with “talent and personality” before legs or faces.⁵³⁶ In 1943, de Mille created the so-called *dream ballet*, “Laurey Makes Up Her Mind,” in *Oklahoma!*, changing Broadway musical theatre and its choreography forever.⁵³⁷ According to Maslon, “in de Mille’s groundbreaking vision, the characters are revealing not only something the audience doesn’t already know, but something the characters don’t even know about *themselves*.⁵³⁸ Hence, as Thomas A. Greenfield states, “through Balanchine and de Mille dance and choreography on the Broadway stage had now been elevated from conspicuous ‘showstopper’ to an artistically integral part of an entire production.”⁵³⁹

At this point in Broadway musical history, singers and actors were rarely involved in any dance numbers.⁵⁴⁰ For example, *Oklahoma!*’s famous dream ballet was danced by *dancing doppelgangers* to the dramatic actors – Katharine Sergava as Dream Laurey, Marc Platt as Dream Curly, and George Church as Dream Jud.⁵⁴¹ As Tommy Tune testifies, “in a Rodgers and Hammerstein musical, the show stopped and there was a ballet. Now it’s much more seamless.”⁵⁴² Finally, it was *director-choreographer* Jerome Robbins who brought a significant change in 1957 with *West Side Story*.⁵⁴³ “Prior to that, the singers would sing and then the dancers would weave through and dance ... Then the songs got rougher, more lusty and with more character, and they started letting us [the dancers] sing,”⁵⁴⁴ remembers Tune. Thus, the first triple threats were *singing and acting dancers* and not vice versa.

⁵³⁶ Ibid. 303.

⁵³⁷ Maslon, *Broadway – The American Musical*. 204.

⁵³⁸ Ibid.

⁵³⁹ Thomas A. Greenfield, ed. *Broadway – An Encyclopedia of Theater and American Culture*, vol. 1: A–L (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 2010). 151.

⁵⁴⁰ Stempel, *Showtime – A History of the Broadway Musical Theater*. 561.

⁵⁴¹ Thomas S. Hischak, *The Rodgers and Hammerstein Encyclopedia* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2007). 157.

⁵⁴² Tommy Tune cit. in Jackson R. Bryer and Richard A. Davison, eds., *The Art of the American Musical – Conversations with the Creators* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005). 245.

⁵⁴³ Greenfield, *Broadway – An Encyclopedia of Theater and American Culture*. 152.

⁵⁴⁴ Tommy Tune cit. in Bryer and Davison, *The Art of the American Musical – Conversations with the Creators*. 245.

In *West Side Story*, “it was all *dancers* who sang, and that was a very big deal,”⁵⁴⁵ noted Tune. While foot mikes were needed to reinforce the generally untrained voices of the dance chorus, they were less necessary for the real vocal power of a Broadway Belt in the leading part of Anita, portrayed by Chita Rivera. Her success story as an eight-time Tony nominee and three-time Tony winner began early in her life: After three years studying with Balanchine, the nineteen-year-old Rivera was cast in the chorus of *Call Me Madam* for the national tour starring Stritch and directed by Robbins.⁵⁴⁶ “I never said I wanted a career. I just wanted to dance,”⁵⁴⁷ says Rivera. “I was at the right place at the right time. It was a good wonderful era. The golden age.”⁵⁴⁸ Only two years later, she replaced Onna White as the principal dancer in *Guys and Dolls* on Broadway.⁵⁴⁹ She turned quickly into a *Broadway gypsy*, going from show to show, and loved it: “I lived it, Ate it. Breathed it. Went to places like Sid and Al’s on 46th Street, or Downey’s. We all went there. All my friends were dancers.”⁵⁵⁰ At this time, she even did not think about singing. “We didn’t even hang out with singers. We used to make fun of the singers,”⁵⁵¹ remembers Rivera. Thus, becoming a recognized Broadway Belt was not her goal. However, there was a piano player with whom she studied “maybe six, seven times. I can’t remember,”⁵⁵² and she recalls being “around when the great ones were around.”⁵⁵³ Like Merman, Rivera insists she had learned singing by doing,⁵⁵⁴ but especially by *watching*. For the whole run of *Call me Madam*, Rivera watched Stritch from the wings and remembers Stritch telling her from that time onward, “I taught you everything you know.”⁵⁵⁵ Looking back on *Mr. Wonderful*, starring Sammy Davies Jr., Riviera remembers: “The

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid. 246.

⁵⁴⁶ Shapiro, *Nothing Like A Dame – Conversations with the Great Women of Musical Theater*. Pos. 849.

⁵⁴⁷ Chita Rivera cit. in ibid. Pos. 1098.

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid. Pos. 1084.

⁵⁴⁹ Ibid. Pos. 1004.

⁵⁵⁰ Chita Rivera cit. in ibid. Pos. 982.

⁵⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵⁵² Ibid. Pos. 988.

⁵⁵³ Ibid. Pos. 1004.

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁵ Elaine Stritch cit. in ibid.

more I sat there the more I realized I was watching the greatest entertainer I had ever seen in my entire damned life and there was a world to learn from him.”⁵⁵⁶ Rivera never stopped trying to learn more. “That’s what I did in all shows I ever did; I stood in the wings, and that’s how I learned.”⁵⁵⁷ Concerning acting, Rivera credits Robbins with teaching her how to act, even though many people complained about Robbins being a bully.⁵⁵⁸ “I was ready for somebody like that … That’s why it’s good to have it. You either take it or you can’t and if you can’t take it you are not going to make it any further than the door.”⁵⁵⁹ In different interviews about her success, Rivera frequently emphasizes “hard work,” “being at the right place at the right time,” and a feeling of having been blessed. “Well, I go there because I was chosen, I worked hard. I have no qualms with saying I worked my butt off, but I loved every minute of it and still do,”⁵⁶⁰ she says, and “if we call that luck, then luck and being ready is what it’s all about.”⁵⁶¹

Rivera’s dancing and her overall “powerful presence”⁵⁶² is the main subject of comments and criticism about her. However, Ben Rimalower goes more into detail when he reviews Rivera’s singing in Bob Fosse’s 1969 movie version of *Sweet Charity*:

Part of what has always made her great is how conversational her singing voice is — she sings the way she speaks. This means her acting always extends into the song, making the lyrics interesting and believable, and, as in this case, a lot of fun!⁵⁶³

⁵⁵⁶ Chita Rivera cit. in ibid.

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid. Pos. 1004.

⁵⁵⁸ Sondheim said about Robbins that “he could be a really, really mean awful man, but I would work with him any time,” and Helen Gallagher recalled that “he would strip you naked, pull the flesh right off of your bones, and then rebuild you. It wasn’t fun to be around. He was mean.” Both cit. in ibid. Pos. 911.

⁵⁵⁹ Chita Rivera cit. in ibid.

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid. 1283.

⁵⁶¹ Ibid. Pos. 1179.

⁵⁶² Ben Rimalower, “How Lucky Can You Get? Top 10 Moments of Tony Award Winner Chita Rivera Belting,” *Playbill*, no. October 5 (2013), <https://www.playbill.com/article/how-lucky-can-you-get-top-10-moments-of-tony-award-winner-chita-rivera-beling-com-210296>.

⁵⁶³ Ibid.

Stephen Citron just calls her a “superb belter,”⁵⁶⁴ and Nathan Hurwitz even equates her with Liza Minelli, praising them together as “two strong performers with big Broadway belt voices.”⁵⁶⁵ Harold Prince simply has declared that “There is nobody who can dance, sing and act like Chita Rivera.”⁵⁶⁶ Nevertheless, Rivera remains primarily a dancer and, instead of writing her biography, in 2005 she created a biographical musical, *Chita Rivera: The Dancer’s Life*, in which she sings, acts, and dances.⁵⁶⁷ Her repertoire is mainly composed of dance *numbers* involving singing and acting as if she cannot stand still – and this might be the most significant difference from belting actresses and singers: As a dancer, Rivera always uses her body language first; singing and acting are complementary. Although she needs to be considered a Broadway Belt, the overall result makes her a belting dancer before being a belter – just like any actress generally remains a belting actress.

Being primarily a dancer and being *ready* are certainly attributes that can be recognized in Rivera’s greatest idol, Gwen Verdon. At the age of two, Verdon began daily dance lessons, due to a muscular problem in her badly knocked knees.⁵⁶⁸ According to Verdon’s biographer, Peter Shelley, Verdon “wasn’t really interested in dance and she didn’t know she was dancing until she saw a Fred Astaire film and became enamored with him.”⁵⁶⁹ In 1944, the nineteen-year-old became a student of Jack Cole, “the father of theatrical jazz dance.”⁵⁷⁰ Coincidence or not, Cole’s reputation as a bully was comparable to Robbins’s. Verdon vowed, “I won’t let him beat me,”⁵⁷¹ but she reportedly did not object to his con-

⁵⁶⁴ Stephen Citron, *Jerry Herman – Poet of the Showtune* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004). 259.

⁵⁶⁵ Nathan Hurwitz, *Songwriters of the American Musical Theatre – A Style Guide for Singers* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2017). 195.

⁵⁶⁶ Harold Prince cit. in Jeryl Brunner, “Five Things You Never Knew About Broadway Superstar Chita Rivera,” *Parade*, no. May 9 (2017), <https://parade.com/569121/jerylbrunner/five-things-you-never-knew-about-broadway-superstar-chita-rivera/>.

⁵⁶⁷ Matthew Murray, “Chita Rivera: The Dancer’s Life,” *Talkin’ Broadway*, no. December 11 (2005), <https://www.talkinbroadway.com/page/world/ChitaRivera.html>.

⁵⁶⁸ Peter Shelley, *Gwen Verdon – A Life on Stage and Screen* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2015). Pos. 98.

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid. Pos. 142.

⁵⁷⁰ Vance Holmes, “The Tradition – America’s Pioneer Theatre Dance Artists – Jack Cole,” accessed June 17, 2019, <http://www.theatredance.com/choreographers/>.

⁵⁷¹ Gwen Verdon cit. in Shelley, *Gwen Verdon – A Life on Stage and Screen*. Pos. 240.

stant abuse.⁵⁷² Like Rivera, Verdon just “took it.” Cole and his friend Jack Gray educated her and made her study choreography, music, drama, costume design, history, anatomy, physiology, sociology, and poetry, and it was Gray who noticed Verdon’s talent for mimicry.⁵⁷³

Still not singing or acting on stage, Verdon was invited to audition for *Can-Can* on Broadway in 1953.⁵⁷⁴ Verdon stated that she was “so scared that my legs wouldn’t hold me,”⁵⁷⁵ but Porter liked her breathless voice.⁵⁷⁶ Mordden describes Verdon’s voice in *Can-Can* as “hoarse, improbable in song, yet it worked [...] she could pass nicely in her one vocal, ‘If You Loved Me Truly,’ ... and breeze through the rest of it on terpsichore.”⁵⁷⁷ *New York Times* critic Brooks Atkinson ignored her singing, and just wrote, “the spectacular dancing was the best thing in the show.”⁵⁷⁸

Following Verdon’s success in *Can-Can*, director-choreographer Bob Fosse wanted her as the female lead in *Damn Yankees*,⁵⁷⁹ and Fosse coached her to act.⁵⁸⁰ Again, not mentioning her singing at all, *New York Times* critic Lewis Funke wrote, “she gives brilliance and sparkle to the evening with her exuberant dancing, her wicked glistening eyes and her sheer delight in the foolery.”⁵⁸¹ Consequently, Verdon took singing lessons for her next production, *New Girl in Town*,⁵⁸² and again for her next big success, *Redhead*.⁵⁸³ Like Rivera, Verdon never tired of learning, but she took classes instead of just watching. Her voice teacher, Keith Davis, gave her images to think of when she sang, and she had to sing on a speaking level to sound more natural.⁵⁸⁴ According to Davis, Verdon had a character voice, “which worked for musical theater because

⁵⁷² Ibid. Pos. 273.

⁵⁷³ Ibid. Pos. 251–262.

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid. Pos. 540.

⁵⁷⁵ Gwen Verdon cit. in ibid. Pos. 552.

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁷ Mordden, *Broadway Babies – The People Who Made The American Musical*. 162.

⁵⁷⁸ Brooks Atkinson cit. in Shelley, *Gwen Verdon – A Life on Stage and Screen*. Pos. 595.

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid. Pos. 740.

⁵⁸⁰ Ibid. Pos. 782.

⁵⁸¹ Lewis Funke cit. in Brantley, *Broadway Musicals – From the Pages of The New York Times*. 153.

⁵⁸² Shelley, *Gwen Verdon – A Life on Stage and Screen*. Pos. 929.

⁵⁸³ Ibid. Pos. 1224.

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid.

a show is about a character so the voice needs to be real.”⁵⁸⁵ For her role interpretation in *Sweet Charity*, Stanley Kauffmann credited her as “a first-class performer: a good singer, an excellent dancer, a thorough, stage-taking professional.”⁵⁸⁶ Here Kauffmann acknowledged Verdon as a triple threat, even though he did not mention acting. Co-starring with Rivera in *Chicago* in 1975, *New York Times*’s critic Clive Barnes wrote that “Miss Verdon’s voice, all candy innocence and yet somehow naughtily suggestive of untold viciousness, is perfectly matched by strangulated tones of Miss Rivera’s blasé worldliness.”⁵⁸⁷ Most comments about Verdon’s voice put her vocal abilities into the context of her dancing, or, as Barnes does, compared hers with other voices. During Verdon’s memorial, Cy Coleman praised “her intelligent interpretation of a song, her immaculate timing and her exquisite sense of comedy,”⁵⁸⁸ while Ethel Merman stated, that “to be a star you have something indefinable, something that makes the world love you. Verdon had that.”⁵⁸⁹ Her indefinable side could be compared to Stritch’s uniqueness, but while Stritch impressed through her natural talent, Verdon convinced audiences and critics with her learned skills. Contrary to Rivera, Verdon’s voice was never considered “big,” and her acting went nearly unmentioned, but the combination of skills made her a Broadway Belt. Her voice was frequently compared to Helen Kane’s, “but with more range.”⁵⁹⁰ However, her voice fitted in, and as shown by her rendition of “If My Friends Could See Me Now” from *Sweet Charity*⁵⁹¹ or “Whatever Lola Wants” from *Damn Yankees*,⁵⁹² Verdon was *performing in performance*:

⁵⁸⁵ Keith Davis cit. in *ibid.*

⁵⁸⁶ Stanley Kauffmann cit. in Brantley, *Broadway Musicals – From the Pages of The New York Times*. 208.

⁵⁸⁷ Clive Barnes cit. in *ibid.* 251.

⁵⁸⁸ Cy Coleman cit. in Shelley, *Gwen Verdon – A Life on Stage and Screen*. Pos. 3848

⁵⁸⁹ Ethel Merman cit. in *ibid.* Pos. 3859.

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid. Pos. 852. Best known for her squeaky interpretation of “I Wanna Be Loved by You” from the musical *Good Boy* in 1929, Helen Kane was immortalized as the model for Fleischer studio’s most famous creation, Betty Boop. See Jarod Hitchings, “Helen Kane,” accessed June 9, 2017. http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0437318/bio?ref_=nm_ov_bio_sm#mini_bio.

⁵⁹¹ Gwen Verdon ‘If They Could See Me Now’ Sweet Charity, posted by “osi sadorio,” June 11, 2018. (YouTube: Google LLC), 5:58, <https://youtu.be/r-5NkhnSSCs>.

⁵⁹² Whatever Lola Wants, Damn Yankees, posted by “hardballget,” 21.11., 2010. (YouTube: Google LLC), 4:05, <https://youtu.be/6kjQmgmor4g>.

Although her dancing was part of the narrative, it compensated singing and acting and became an *individual show* in itself.

At the same time as Fosse/Verdon's *Chicago* premiered, another choreographer was changing the impact of dancing in Broadway musical theatre: Michael Bennett. Defeating Fosse's *Chicago* at the Tony Awards in 1976, Bennett won the director's Tony for *A Chorus Line*,⁵⁹³ followed by another Tony for *Dreamgirls* in 1982.⁵⁹⁴ *A Chorus Line* closed fifteen years after its premiere and was, at this time, the longest-running production in Broadway musical history.⁵⁹⁵ According to Greenfield, "A *Chorus Line* represented the ultimate democratization of the Broadway musical."⁵⁹⁶ A trend to develop new projects Off-Broadway, called a *workshop*, was initially responsible for this democratization.⁵⁹⁷ As Maslon states, "The workshop would become the new method of developing musicals and a Broadway institution."⁵⁹⁸ Since then, workshops have been an essential part of a Broadway musical's creation. *A Chorus Line* was the first step into the anonymity of the Broadway musical itself: All performers (except for Zach, the male lead part) had to belt out a song, and everyone and no one was a lead character with an individual role. The invention of body microphones underlined the performers' individuality and the chorus's uniformity at the same time. Although the amplification of every voice was individual, the sound of the whole cast became uniform.⁵⁹⁹ The only difference between Cassie's part and the other female characters is the fact that she was the past love interest of the male lead, Zach. Nevertheless, Donna McKechnie won the Tony Award for Best Performance by a Leading Actress in a Musical. But her Broadway career is not comparable to Verdon's or Rivera's. After *A Cho-*

⁵⁹³ Lee Alan Morrow, *The Tony Award Book – Four Decades of Great American Theater* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1987). 247.

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid. 256.

⁵⁹⁵ Maslon, *Broadway – The American Musical*. 344.

⁵⁹⁶ Greenfield, *Broadway – An Encyclopedia of Theater and American Culture*. 153.

⁵⁹⁷ Maslon, *Broadway – The American Musical*. 339.

⁵⁹⁸ Ibid. 344–345.

⁵⁹⁹ Ibid.

rus Line, she only appeared in three more productions on Broadway, all without comparable recognition.⁶⁰⁰

Contrary to Rivera's sort of "full package" of dancing, acting, and singing, and Verdon's *individual* performances, the performers of *A Chorus Line* represent the *uniformity* of the triple threat. Maslon writes that "the climax of the show celebrates only the dancer's uniformity, not their individuality,"⁶⁰¹ but since the dancers in *A Chorus Line* are not just dancers anymore, the uniformity of the cast, composed of chorus line *dancers*, becomes the uniformity of the Broadway musical *performers*. As Taylor states, "*A Chorus Line* explores the compromise between individuality and community, as the performers in the staged audition are required to demonstrate their individuality in order to get a job that requires absolute conformity."⁶⁰² *A Chorus Line* ushered in a new form of Broadway musical theatre, the *ensemble musical*. Although it was crucial to have a Broadway Belt (or more) in the show, she was not the primary interest as an *individual* character anymore. The Broadway Belt as the leading lady had lost its importance. Bruce Kirle says about *A Chorus Line* that the dancers "are rewarded for their hard work with anonymity and negation of self,"⁶⁰³ and Warren Hoffman confirms that the dancers' "personalities are essentially vaporized, made meaningless by the anonymity that the line imposes on them."⁶⁰⁴ In contrast, Taylor states that *A Chorus Line* "celebrates the individuals, their interactions, and their relationships; it celebrates the ability of performers to represent individuality within and through community."⁶⁰⁵ All these views have merit: While Kirle and Hoffman see the overall picture of the mass of talented triple threats dreaming to become Broadway stars, but stuck

⁶⁰⁰ The Broadway League, "Donna McKechnie," accessed March 15, 2020. <https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-cast-staff/donna-mckechnie-68291>.

⁶⁰¹ Maslon, *Broadway – The American Musical*. 344.

⁶⁰² Millie Taylor and Dominic Symonds, *Gestures of Music Theater – The Performativity of Song and Dance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). 277.

⁶⁰³ Bruce Kirle cit. in Elizabeth L. Wollman, *A Critical Companion to the American Stage Musical* (London, New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2017). 156.

⁶⁰⁴ Warren Hoffman cit. in *ibid*.

⁶⁰⁵ Taylor and Symonds, *Gestures of Music Theater – The Performativity of Song and Dance*. 277.

in the chorus line, Taylor sees the star quality in everyone, whether they make it or not.

Through the work of Robbins, Fosse, and Bennett,⁶⁰⁶ dancing became as crucial as singing and acting for the Broadway musical's leading performers. Hence, after *A Chorus Line*, many Broadway belters began to have a harder time getting jobs without being an accomplished dancer, or at least a good *mover*.⁶⁰⁷ While Verdon and Rivera are dancers who *grew into* triple threats as they advanced in their careers, already *being* a triple threat has become a prerequisite to becoming a cast member of a Broadway musical today. Trained to fit into the uniformity which most ensemble numbers require, these cast members are easily interchangeable, even though each of them is a unique talent. Hence, *A Chorus Line* paved the way for many Broadway musicals without star singers and Broadway icons.

Nevertheless, a few of these unique talents, blessed with originality and individuality, still accomplish their goal, stepping out of the chorus line to become a Broadway Belt. Even if since the 1970s professional dancing remains a standard for a Broadway musical performer, there will always be a show with songs only an accomplished singer can belt out – and for which she does not have to dance, as is the case for Elphaba, Evita or Rose. As long as composers write such songs for a musical comedy, musical play, or musical drama, the Broadway Belt is principally a singing actress or acting singer who *moves* on stage but does not need to be an accomplished dancer. As Millie Taylor states, “The performer shows the audience the character she has constructed through rehearsal by re-constructing it in performance, and the singer demonstrates both

606 Although I based my argumentation in this chapter on Robbins, Fosse and Bennett, I do not want to forget to mention eight-time Tony winner Gower Champion, the director-choreographer of such shows as *Bye, Bye Birdie*, starring Chita Rivera, and *Hello, Dolly!*, starring Carol Channing, whom he had introduced to Broadway in *Lend an Ear* as early as 1948. Champion's last hit became *42nd Street*, which premiered the day he died, on August 25, 1980. His successor is Tommy Tune, a protégé of Bennett and the only Tony winner as choreographer *and* performer. He is acknowledged as “Gower Champion's heir as Broadway's foremost showman.” See Morrow, *The Tony Award Book – Four Decades of Great American Theater*. 176.

607 “Movers” are performers with little or no formal dance training, but able to learn necessary steps.

practiced technique and rehearsed performance when singing.”⁶⁰⁸ Nevertheless, when it comes to dance musicals, Taylor’s assessment would need to be appended as follows: “...and the *singing dancer* demonstrates both practiced technique and rehearsed performance when singing *and dancing*.” Parts like “Dorothy Brooks” or “Peggy Sawyer” in *42nd Street* need triple threats who are more or less equally adept at dancing, acting, and singing, but, as much as dance musicals put dancing into the focus, what the audience remembers the most on their way out of the theater are the songs of the leading performer.

When Taylor writes that there is “no agreement on how audiences experience sung performance,”⁶⁰⁹ she suggests that this experience is not only based on a triple threat presenting her best possible combination of singing, acting, and dancing as a Broadway Belt. There is something more that the performer needs to bring to the part, something entirely their own. Indeed, while Bennett highlights in “One,” the finale of *A Chorus Line*, that the accomplished triple threat usually remains anonymous in the chorus line,⁶¹⁰ he also shows – just before this finale – Zach’s *selection* of those he had chosen to get the job. Even though he only can give a contract to eight performers – and the others are out of the game – Zach says, “I think you’re all terrific,”⁶¹¹ to make it clear that every performer’s uniqueness counts.

In summary, today’s Broadway belters generally need to be as much naturally talented or trained singers, actresses (or character actresses) or comics, as they are trained dancers (depending on the show). At the beginning of the 20th century, belting in musical theatre was generally based on the singer’s natural vocal talent, as it was the case for Eva Tanguay, Maggie Cline, Sophie Tucker, Blossom Seeley, and Beatrice Lillie, to mention just a few again, followed and surpassed by Merman. Through the Broadway musical theatre’s changing aesthetics, acting and dancing become crucial, but the unique belt voice stays in the foreground, even

⁶⁰⁸ Millie Taylor and Dominic Symonds, *Studying Musical Theatre – Theory and Practice* (London: Palgrave Macmillan Education, 2014). 218.

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid. 231.

⁶¹⁰ Maslon, *Broadway – The American Musical*. 343.

⁶¹¹ A Chorus Line (2006) Broadway Show *Full*, posted by “Wallace, Dave,” 2016. (YouTube: Google LLC), 2:07:28, https://youtu.be/SP8syH_cjMo?t=7208.

though compromises need to be made for acting and dancing. After examining the origins of belting, its vocal sound, and its tone production, I addressed in this chapter the question of at which point the title “Broadway Belt” is attributed to Broadway belters with different primary skills. Thanks to amplification, acting or dancing can compensate for a certain lack of belting abilities, but being a triple threat cannot replace the uniqueness of a Broadway Belt like Merman, Channing, Lansbury, LuPone, Rivera, or Verdon, all acknowledged as *stars* and *divas*.

Discussing their *actor's personage*, a term I will explain referring to Philip Auslander's concept of *Musical Personae*⁶¹² and especially David Graver's article *The Actor's Bodies*,⁶¹³ chapter three will deal with stars and divas behind the title “Broadway Belt.”

⁶¹² Philip Auslander, “Musical Personae,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 50, no. 1 (2006).

⁶¹³ Graver, “The Actor's Bodies.”

3 The Broadway Belt – Star, Diva, and Hard-Working Woman

While chapter two focused on the development of belting in Broadway musical theatre, the belt sound, and the necessary vocal talent and technique to be assigned the title Broadway Belt, chapter three will explore the women behind the voice. Although triple threats like Chita Rivera, Gwen Verdon, Donna McKechnie, and some other exquisite dancers are recognized leading ladies, it is necessary to realize that their singing voices are not comparable to voices like these of Merman or LuPone. On the other hand, LuPone's and Merman's dancing abilities are limited and not comparable to the talent of a trained dancer. They all are primarily *performers* putting their strongest talent in the foreground: a singer with acting and dancing skills, or a dancer with the ability to sing and act. Furthermore, an actress like Lansbury is, first of all, chiefly perceived and appreciated by the audience to be *acting* and applauded for her singing and dancing additionally. Consequently, singers and dancers are always performers who also act, while an actress in a musical primarily portrays a character, using her performance skills of singing and dancing to cope with the particular demands of musical theatre.

According to Joe Deer and Rocco Dal Vera, “the transition from one who needs the attention of the audience to one who seeks to serve the dramatic moment” differentiates between being a performer and being an actor. Although this perspective could be acceptable for the Broadway musical performer as a member of the cast, who mainly performs in the uniformity of the chorus line,² it is necessary for a Broadway Belt that acting and performing *merge*: As the leading lady, a Broadway Belt focuses on portraying the character, while she *also* performs songs and dances. The question arises: is the Broadway Belt a performing actress, who sings and dances, or, is she an acting performer, a singer or dancer who acts?

1 Joe Deer and Rocco Dal Vera, *Acting in Musical Theatre – A Comprehensive Course* (London: Routledge, 2016). 14.

2 My perspective concentrates here on the performance of the ensemble, although, of course, cast members often portray characters in different small parts throughout the show.

Interestingly, it is possible to be both, depending on the show. For example, Verdon portrays the character of Charity Hope Valentine in *Sweet Charity* and she *performs* the song “If They Could See Me Now.” In this performance, Verdon can prove her talent as a singing dancer. However, this scene is not crucial to understanding the storyline. Thus the audience perceives her in this scene primarily as a performer, a singing dancer who acts. In *A Chorus Line*, Donna McKechnie as Cassie performs the song “The Music and the Mirror” in front of Zach to convince him to give her a part in his show. Her performance for Zach as the *character* Cassie is a part of portraying the character herself as part of the storyline. Here, McKechnie appears as a performing actress. However, in this scene – like Verdon – McKechnie also dances for the audience as a singing dancer. Thus, although the priorities ascribed to singing, dancing, and acting will depend on the role and the scene, every Broadway Belt is always an acting performer *and* a performing actress.

Nevertheless, the success of a Broadway Belt does not only depend on the actress’s best combination of talent. How the audience perceives the Broadway Belt as a *person* is the main factor of her success, and I will dedicate this chapter to examine differences and commonalities between Broadway belters. For that, it is necessary to define some terms, and how I will apply them in this chapter.

With a performer’s first success in a Broadway musical, the positive reception by the audience, critics, and media can be responsible for a musical performer becoming a Broadway *star*.³ Hans-Otto Huegel defines a star as a person, primarily an actor, singer, or athlete, who became famous through the media.⁴ He states that the star’s public image is composed of characteristics and appearances which are attributed to the person, and incorporates both the talent she became successful with *and* her private life.⁵ That said, I would suggest that it is crucial to reserve the term *star* for a person with a special *ability* or talent of public interest. A star is born through achievement based on

³ As I will explain, my use of the term “star,” as in *Broadway star*, differs from Richard Dyer’s explanation of “film star.” See Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies – Film Stars and Society* (London: Routledge, 2004). 2.

⁴ Huegel, “Star.” 441.

⁵ Ibid.

talent. However, as soon as a person is referred to as a star, the audience, critics, and fans are interested in the *real* person and his or her private life. Then the star becomes a *celebrity*, a person who reached stardom through the highest achievement of his or her talent and, simultaneously, through the *public perception* of the “real” person behind the artist. As Christine Geraghty argues, a celebrity is “someone whose fame rests overwhelmingly on what happens outside the sphere of their work, and who is famous for having a lifestyle.”⁶ Although a star still becomes *celebrated* for the talent which makes him or her famous, the meaning of the term *celebrity* has changed in today’s world of social media celebrities and influencers. According to Daniel Boorstin, a 21st-century celebrity is “someone well-known for their well-knownness.”⁷ Someone can become famous just by posting pictures on Instagram, a video clip on YouTube, or a comment on Twitter. Consequently, a star is also a celebrity, while today’s celebrities do not necessarily have any star qualities. Thus, the perception of the *person* behind the star – who is also the *artist* that made him or her a *celebrated* star, is open to interpretations.

Auslander states, that, “the audience generally infers what performers are like as real people from their ‘performance personae’ and the characters they portray.”⁸ He uses the term “persona” to mean “a performed presence that is neither an overtly fictional character nor simply equivalent to the performer’s ‘real’ identity.”⁹ As an example, Auslander presents the actor Jack Nicholson and differentiates three layers¹⁰ in the actor’s filmed performances: the real person, the celebrity movie star,

⁶ Christine Geraghty cit. in David C. Giles, *Twenty-First Century Celebrity – Fame in Digital Culture* (Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2018). 7.

⁷ Daniel Boorstin cit. in *ibid.* 12.

⁸ Philip Auslander cit. in Jon Mikkel Broch Alvik, “Armed with the Faith of a Child – Marit Larsen and Strategies of Faking – The Mannered Self: Faking Naivety,” in *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Music and Gender*, ed. Stan Hawkins (New York: Routledge, 2017). 258.

⁹ Auslander, “Musical Personae.” 102.

¹⁰ Auslander explains his use of these three layers in an earlier article: “From this point on, I will refer to the three layers of performance he [Simon Frith] identifies as the real person (the performer as human being), the performance persona (which corresponds to Frith’s star personality or image) and the character (Frith’s song personality [the role required by the lyric]).” See “Performance Analysis and Popular Music: A Manifesto – Musicians as Performers: A Disciplinary Dilemma,” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 14 (1)2004). 6.

and the actor portraying a character.¹¹ In this example, the *celebrity movie star* is what Auslander calls the *performance persona*: a performed presence while performing. The audience of one of Nicholson's movies does not just see the character the actor Nicholson portrays, but also the performance of a celebrity movie star while portraying a character.¹² "All three layers may be active simultaneously in a given musical performance,"¹³ emphasizes Auslander. He grounds his argument on David Graver's concept of *personage*, saying that "Graver differentiates the actor's presence before the audience as a publicly visible person from the character portrayed and calls this kind of presence an *actor's personage*."¹⁴ According to Graver, "this personage body is not the real person behind [...] the character. Personage status is not a foundational reality but simply another way of representing oneself, or, rather, a way of representing oneself within a discursive domain."¹⁵ He adds that "actors appear as personages. Personage is most visible in celebrities."¹⁶ Consequently, the term "actor's personage" would cover the performance of a (celebrity) performer (perceived as such by the audience while the performer portrays a character) *and* the performer's self-representation. However, Graver says furthermore that "the essence of a celebrity's visibility is not, however, a physical body but an aura generated by the public circulation of stories about the actor."¹⁷ In other words, Graver's term *actor's personage* describes not only Auslander's performance persona including the (celebrity) performer's self-representation while performing but also how the (celebrity) performer is *perceived* in public, offstage, when not portraying a character.

Considering Graver's term more inclusively, I will refer to "actor's personage" to examine the woman behind the Broadway Belt. Addition-

¹¹ "Musical Personae." 101.

¹² Ibid. 102. Auslander explains here in a footnote to use the term *persona* for continuity reasons since he used "persona as a heuristic in discussions of performance art, experimental theatre, and stand-up comedy" in some of his earlier work.

¹³ Auslander, "Performance Analysis and Popular Music: A Manifesto – Musicians as Performers: A Disciplinary Dilemma." 6.

¹⁴ "Musical Personae" 101.

¹⁵ Graver, "The Actor's Bodies." 164.

¹⁶ Ibid. 163.

¹⁷ Ibid.

ally, I will use the term *star* for a person with a special ability or talent of public interest, recognized by the audience, critics, and fans.

When an elite Broadway Belt becomes a star, it does not take much time until she is publicly called a *diva*.¹⁸ Usually, fans, even critics, begin to call her a diva with voices full of admiration for her stage performance, speaking of her *divine* singing, acting, or dancing.¹⁹ Huegel uses the dictionary definition from the word's origin, the Latin for "goddess, fine Lady" and "goddess, divine (one)."²⁰ This definition, the diva as the *divine one*, concentrates on the brilliant performer equipped with talent (and skills) that not everybody can achieve. Huegel states that, during the 19th century, celebrated opera singers were called divas uniquely in this definition's sense.²¹ They were admired for their virtuosity, as was the case for a *prima donna*²²: the *first* singer, in terms of a superior artistic position, compared to the second singer.²³ Huegel states that the terms "prima donna" and "diva" did not include the meaning of *star* until the beginning of the 20th century.²⁴ In this context, he uses the term "star" in the sense of *celebrity*, as it was defined until the end of the 20th century. He also makes a clear differentiation between the original use of the term "diva," a virtuosic star celebrated for her talent, and today's general understanding of the term which he considers to be "a figure of popular culture with star qualities."²⁵ However, Huegel emphasizes the second dictionary explanation of the term as "a self-important person who is temperamental and difficult to please (typically used of a

¹⁸ As I will demonstrate, the *Broadway diva* differs from the classical diva whose age ended with the postmodern era. See Elisabeth Bronfen, "The Diva – A Cultural History of Admiration," *English and American Studies in German* 2004, no. November 8 (2003). 100.

¹⁹ Many critics and interviewers use the term "divine" in this context.

²⁰ Huegel cites the German dictionary "Duden. Das große Wörterbuch der dt. Sprache, 1993, Bd.2." Since I am writing in the English language and my subject is based in American culture, I prefer using the definition of English dictionaries to avoid translation errors or misunderstandings. However, the chosen definitions correspond to the ones Huegel used. Cambridge Dictionary. 2019, s.v. "diva." <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/diva>.

²¹ Huegel, "Diva." 159.

²² "prima donna" means originally "chief female singer in opera," the leading lady. See Oxford Dictionaries. 2020, s.v. "prima donna." https://www.lexico.com/definition/prima_donna.

²³ Friedrich Walter cit. in Huegel, "Diva." 159.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

woman),”²⁶ or “a woman who behaves as if she is very special or important.”²⁷ Huegel assumes that such a diva *creates* a second career as a cultural symbol, besides the publicly known, talented, and successful star.²⁸ With this assessment, he connects the term “diva” to Auslander’s term “performance persona” *and* the concept of a performed presence beyond the diva’s presence on stage. Additionally, Huegel also suggests that such a diva could be responsible for a self-made image due to eccentric behavior and airs and graces,²⁹ like public outbursts, backstage stories of star behavior, special demands for personal comfort, or extravagant clothing and attitude. Such an image is included in Graver’s term “actor’s personage” – in this case, a negative version of it. Sheryl Lee Ralph (who played Deena in the original Broadway production of *Dreamgirls*) calls a diva with such an actor’s personage a “witch with a b.”³⁰ Although there are certainly stars and celebrities who merit the attribute “witch with a b,” I suggest remembering how crucial the *perception* of the audience and critics is when it comes to the person off-stage, behind the performer on stage. It is possible, that rumors about the performer and things she is claimed to have said are not true or are taken out of context. In that case, there is no actual actor’s personage corresponding to the diva image of a “witch with a b”; however, the public perception of her as such, once established, remains forever. Thus, all in all, the *diva* is a social construct built from the successful star and the actor’s personage. In line with this, I will use the term “diva” for a Broadway Belt who reached stardom through her talent and her actor’s personage, that image that combines how she is perceived on stage behind the character she portrays *and* the offstage, public image of the woman – an image in the minds of audiences and critics that *may* be self-created.

²⁶ Huegel cites again the German dictionary “Der Duden.” He even considers the second meaning of the term “diva” as the center point of the term’s definition. See *ibid*. I chose the definition of the Oxford Dictionaries in the English language. See Oxford Dictionaries. 2019, s.v. “diva.” <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/diva>. 159.

²⁷ s.v. “shout.”

²⁸ Huegel, “Diva.” 161.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ I choose Ralph’s expression, “witch with a b,” to highlight the difference between diva types further on in this chapter. Sheryl Lee Ralph, *Redefining DIVA – Life Lessons from the Original Dreamgirl* (New York: Gallery Books – Karen Hunter Publishing, 2011). Pos. 141.

In chapter 3.1, *The Actor's Personage – The Broadway Belt behind the Role*, I will examine the attributes of a Broadway belter's actor's personage; how she describes herself; and the theatrical character's aspects, accredited by critics and audiences, to create a star image. The analysis concentrates on personal and individual idiosyncrasies as well as the Broadway belter's close connection to her most successful portrayals. Chapter 3.2, *The Star and Her Vehicle*, will concentrate on the creators of the Broadway musical that makes the Broadway Belt a star. All elite Broadway belters are chosen to create the character the respective creative team had in mind. The close connection between the creators of a Broadway musical and their star indicates that the success of a Broadway musical with a Broadway Belt portraying the main character depends as much on the star qualities and the actor's personage as on the quality of the musical that has to *serve* the leading lady – and *not* vice versa. In the two decades that followed *A Chorus Line* (1975), there were crucial changes to the aesthetics of Broadway musical theatre and the development of the genre in general. Therefore, this chapter will also discuss whether a Broadway Belt still has the impact on Broadway musical theatre today that she had before the 1980s.

For a performer who auditions to create a character in a new musical or a revival, the casting and rehearsal process is often emotionally and personally stressful.³¹ In such situations, the Broadway Belt is sometimes seen as temperamental, demanding, or difficult to work with. These attributes are that of a *diva* when defined as a *witch with a b*. In chapter 3.3, *Divas and Diva Roles – A Mutual Agreement*, I will discuss the understanding of the term "diva" for a talented performer and her actor's personage in the context of Broadway musical theatre and the Broadway belter's connection to her roles. Chapter 3.4, *Belting and Feminism – Belting Out and Speaking Up*, will exhibit that the success of some elite Broadway belters in their most iconic parts of independent, strong women is directly connected to the waves of feminism. The

³¹ For example, when Lansbury auditioned three times in three years to get "Mame," or when LuPone took over the part of Eva Perón on Broadway, previously created by Elaine Paige in London's West End, both describe their situations as highly stressful. See Gottfried, *Balancing Act – The Authorized Biography of Angela Lansbury*. 158, and LuPone and Diehl, *Patti LuPone – A Memoir*. 113.

analysis of their sayings, as well as comments by critics and audiences concerning the belter's feminist attitude in public, and the feminist roles themselves, will demonstrate that the Broadway Belt advocates on stage what women are fighting for in the United States society. Since the first women's movement was notably also connected to the abolitionist movement,³² I will examine the position of African-American belters in Broadway musical theatre in this context and the lack of consideration for non-cliché roles during the 20th century (and even until today).

Even though progress has been made concerning feminist roles and multiracial castings, it is still insignificant and unveils conflicts in American society concerning gender and ethnicity. Originally in an influential position in American culture due to the social impact of Broadway musical theatre, the Broadway Belt needs to recover her place. I will suggest that more progress could be made by Broadway belters of any ethnicity taking on feminist characters and using her actor's personage offstage to represent multiracial feminism.

3.1 The Actor's Personage – The Broadway Belt Behind the Role

My discursive object in this chapter is the actor's personage of a Broadway Belt, especially her self-presentation on- and offstage, and the audience's and critics' perception. The most intriguing questions for me are: What are the characteristics of the actor's personage for some chosen elite belters? Are these individual for each elite belter or are these *labels*? Is the actor's personage a sort of gender role which is, as such, responsible for the identity formation of a Broadway Belt? To discuss some examples, I decided to structure this chapter after common aspects of different Broadway belters. The results will point out characteristics that will guide the subsequent chapters as they examine the Broadway Belt.

³² Ellen Carol DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage – The Emergence of an Independent Women's Movement in America 1848–1869* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978). 32.

Since the beginning of musical theatre, especially in opera, the voice register³³ of the artist says everything about the character: Soubrettes play usually very young innocent women, naive but energetic, portraying maids, servants, and peasant girls.³⁴ Lyric sopranos are the young, middle-class women waiting to get married, and *spinto* and dramatic sopranos are often larger-than-life characters who die at the end of the opera or at least go mad.³⁵ Contraltos play mainly mature female roles of strong and forceful women, wild and temperamental or else elder matrons (in the sense of dignified and noble ladies), or, pejoratively, overweight “big mamas.”³⁶ While in opera, a classically-trained voice creates a certain distance between the singer and the role,³⁷ in vaudeville and Broadway musical theatre such classifications are generally associated with the performer’s actor’s personage. To name just a few, May Irwin was described as “blonde and buxom,”³⁸ Maggie Cline was “the Bowery Brunhilde,”³⁹ and Sophie Tucker “one of the last Red-Hot Mamas.”⁴⁰ Since Graver states that “the prospect of seeing a star’s body draws some people to the theater more forcefully than any other attraction,”⁴¹ my analysis will include to what degree Graver’s claim is valid for the Broadway Belt.

33 The German “Fach” system classifies singers in accordance to their range and color of the voice. Since some Broadway musical parts overlap usual Fach classifications, I choose the term “voice register” as a more neutral term to describe what kind of voice represents a role’s characterization.

34 Opera America, “Notes – National Opera Teacher and Educator Source: Voice Types,” accessed October 10, 2018. <http://apps.operaamerica.org/applications/notes/voice.aspx>.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 Classical singing is generally considered “the great art of the past.” For example, see John Rockwell, “Music; Fine Singing Isn’t Dead, It’s Just An Art In Transition,” *The New York Times*, no. June 28 (1987), <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/06/28/arts/music-fine-singing-isn-t-dead-it-s-just-an-art-in-transition.html>. The classically-trained singer is supposed to be an executive of the art of singing and, thus cannot directly be identified with the role’s character. However, the actor’s personage of some opera stars like Maria Callas or Anna Netrebko are occasionally considered as corresponding to their roles.

38 Bordman, *American Musical Theatre: A Chronicle*. 159.

39 Cullen, Hackman, and McNeilly, *Vaudeville Old and New. An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America*, Vol. 1. 237.

40 Susan and Ecker, “Sophie Tucker”.

41 Graver, “The Actor’s Bodies.” 163.

3.1.1 The Brass(y) Lady

When Aristotle considered the actor as “one of the least important elements of the dramatic medium,”⁴² he had never heard or met any Broadway Belt performing in a Broadway musical, especially not Ethel Merman. According to Murray Schumach, “The chunky, aggressive star”⁴³ possessed a “clarion voice, brash personality, shrewd comic sense, and steel nerves.”⁴⁴ In books, articles, and critiques, one of the most used expressions to name or describe Merman was and still is the *brassy* lady.⁴⁵ While the term “brassy” is not an especially charming word to describe a woman, in this context, the term “brass(y)” needs also to be understood as it is used in the word “brass band.” A brass band is composed of musicians playing a brass instrument and Merman’s “braying trumpet of a voice”⁴⁶ demands this expression. One of Merman’s most interesting successors in this regard is Patti LuPone, born forty years after Merman and, as mentioned in chapter 2.4.1, called the singer with “once-in-a-generation pipes.”⁴⁷ Frank Rich states that “Ms. LuPone has her own brash American style and most of all, a blazing spontaneity.”⁴⁸ While Schumach speaks about Merman’s “brash personality,” Rich assumes that LuPone has her own “brash American style.” Both authors used the term “brash” (as a synonym to “brassy”) to describe each belter’s actor’s personage and to underline an apparent resemblance of Merman and LuPone. When Kenrick names Merman a brassy lady in the sense of a strong, self-assured, determined woman with a

⁴² Ibid. 171.

⁴³ Schumach, “Ethel Merman, Queen of Musicals, Dies at 76.”

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ For example, see Lee Comegys, “Ethel Merman dead at 75,” *United Press International*, no. February 15 (1984), <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1984/02/15/Ethel-Merman-dead-at-75/7043445669200/>. Kellow, *Ethel Merman: A Life*. 39, 52, 56, 110, 130, 156, 161, 166, 176.

⁴⁶ Stephen Holden, “Review/Theater; The Irrepressible Merman: Affectionate Remembrance,” *The New York Times*, no. June 10 (1989): <https://www.nytimes.com/1989/06/10/theater/review-theater-the-irrepressible-merman-affectionate-remembrance.html>.

⁴⁷ Green, “Let Her Entertain You, Please!”

⁴⁸ Sacks, “She’s the Top.”

very loud voice,⁴⁹ he describes Merman's actor's personage in the context of her vocal talent. In contrast, when LuPone's co-star Howard McGillin states that "she really is completely uninhibited and throws herself into the performance with abandon, ... Patti is a kind of brassy dame,"⁵⁰ his words describe LuPone's actor's personage in the context of her role interpretation. However, that is not to say that Merman did not interpret her roles. Her roles matched with her actor's personage – and she knew it, admitting that "on Broadway, audiences pulled for the maverick heroine who eventually revealed a marshmallow heart and got the guy. That's where I belonged."⁵¹ When she says that "the qualities that helped me on Broadway limited me in pictures,"⁵² she shows she knows that she had to accept the public image of the brassy lady in support of her Broadway musical career, an idea she affirms when she says, "Thanks to newspapermen, magazine writers, talk-show hosts *and me*, legend has it that when God created me, he gave me a big distinctive voice, a lot of boldness and no heart."⁵³ Contrary to LuPone, Merman underlined the public perception of her actor's personage as "tough and brassy, funny and sassy."⁵⁴ She even conceded that "it's true that I use a few four-letter words when I'm riled or with close friends, but I choose my spots. ... I know when to use them."⁵⁵ The way Merman presented herself publicly, especially through her language, corresponds to the roles of self-confident women she portrayed in Broadway musicals as *Call Me Madam*, *Anything Goes*, and *Panama Hattie*, to name just a few. Accepting the public perception of her actor's personage and *going with it* was certainly part of her long and successful career.

In contrast, LuPone calls the typecasting effect in *Evita* (1978) her first big success on Broadway, the "public confusion of her with character."⁵⁶ According to *The New York Times*, LuPone has some concern

⁴⁹ John Kenrick, "Ethel Merman: A Brief Biography," accessed July 30, 2019. <http://www.musicals101.com/mermbio.htm>.

⁵⁰ Sacks, "She's the Top."

⁵¹ Merman and Eells, *Merman*. 67.

⁵² Ibid. 66.

⁵³ Ibid. 7.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 7.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Patti LuPone cit. in Sacks, "She's the Top."

about the public's perception of her: "A lot of people, just from *Evita*, they thought, 'She wasn't funny; she wasn't sad either; she was just a bitch.'"⁵⁷ However, LuPone does occasionally give reason to believe that her actor's personage corresponds to her character in *Evita*. Getting frequently "called a diva just for speaking up,"⁵⁸ she argues, happens "because women are supposed to shut up, or not think those thoughts or talk back. It's crazy. But talking back is something I've done since I was a little girl, and it's always got me in trouble. Ha!"⁵⁹

As different as Merman's and LuPone's outbursts might be, their publicly speaking-up is, first of all, considered to be honesty, for which they are admired, although their language gives them the reputation of being brassy. As Merman cited in her biography, a fellow told a reporter, "What I like about Ethel, is that she'll give it to you to your face and not to your back."⁶⁰ While many supposed-to-be quotations and sayings of Merman⁶¹ suggest that Merman had no hesitation maintaining her actor's personage as the brassy lady, LuPone admits in an interview, "I can't stand the red carpet. It's just so tedious and I'm not good on it because I will always speak the truth, and it's not necessarily appropriate in the environment."⁶² Although she frequently provokes being perceived as brassy in such situations,⁶³ she attributes that to her origins, being "totally Italian, and it's a big personality."⁶⁴ Her brother Robert confirms that "she was rebellious. She would be climbing out the window at 3 A.M. to sing and dance down the middle of Main Street."⁶⁵ In contrast, Merman always stated that she loved her par-

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Freeman, "Print that! Broadway Legend Patti LuPone Sounds Off".

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Merman and Eells, *Merman*. 7–8.

⁶¹ Merman confirmed some of her quotes and sayings in her biography (see *ibid*); others might be hearsay. Nevertheless, she attested to enough to understand that she liked to speak up whenever and wherever she wanted. Different websites list Merman quotes; for example, <https://www.broadwayworld.com/board/readmessage.php?page=4&thread=941688> and <https://www.inspiringquotes.us/author/7946-ethel-merman>.

⁶² Freeman, "Print that! Broadway Legend Patti LuPone Sounds Off".

⁶³ For example, LuPone speaks up on the red carpet of the Tony Awards, see Tony Award – Should President Trump Watch Your Show?, posted by "Variety," June 13, 2017. (YouTube: Google LLC), 2:47, <https://youtu.be/Xwlrm3Kawkk>.

⁶⁴ Patti LuPone cit. in Internet Movie Database, "Patti LuPone Quotes," accessed September 28, 2019. <https://m.imdb.com/name/nm0526985/quotes>.

⁶⁵ Sacks, "She's the Top."

ents, but “was scared to death” of them.⁶⁶ Thus, although the discursive image of LuPone’s actor’s personage appears as brassy due to her Italian origins, she says she just cannot help it, while Merman, apparently, actively maintained her brassy image through her public outbursts. Even though her son, Bob Levitt, says that “her vulgar side did exist,”⁶⁷ he goes on to add, “but it was a small fraction of her true humor.”⁶⁸ Tony Cointreau goes as far as saying, “It’s interesting that in twenty-five years, I never saw that [abrasive, vulgar] side. She wasn’t like that.”⁶⁹ However, in her biography, Merman confirms keeping up her image actively when she states, “For almost fifty years I’ve made a wonderful living playing that theatrical character – the *professional* brassy lady.”⁷⁰ Agreeing with Huegel, when he posits the principle that, for a diva, the whole world is a stage,⁷¹ I would argue that Merman’s remark confirms that she probably created her actor’s personage as a theatrical character corresponding to the theatrical character of her roles. Another good reason for Merman to maintain this image was certainly that it offered her a “wonderful living,” financially.

As for LuPone, on some occasions she suggests that she doesn’t care about her reputation, asking, “Why complain about someone who delivers?”⁷² LuPone even advocates for the right to speak up and to be what she calls “temperamental.” She explains, “If someone has the talent, they have the RIGHT to be temperamental. They complained about Bette Midler when she was doing Dolly, but she wouldn’t be exciting if she wasn’t temperamental. It’s only the ones who don’t have the talent and are temperamental who make you say, ‘Just get out of here!’”⁷³ LuPone refers with the last phrase of this citation to *celebrities*, in the modern sense of the word, who do not offer talent, just being “witches with a b.” When she states that being exciting includes being temperamental, her words indicate how crucial her actor’s personage

⁶⁶ Merman and Eells, *Merman*. 22.

⁶⁷ Flinn, *Brass Diva: The Life and Legends of Ethel Merman*. 319.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Merman and Eells, *Merman*. 7.

⁷¹ Huegel, “Diva.” 159.

⁷² Patti LuPone cit. in Freeman, “Print that! Broadway Legend Patti LuPone Sounds Off”.

⁷³ Ibid.

is when it comes to the interpretation of a character – and if it is necessary to be brassy in support of a portrayal, she does not hesitate. Consequently, after *Evita*, her biggest successes are always in roles with a brassy touch, like Joanne in *Company*, Mrs. Lovett in *Sweeney Todd*, or Rose in *Gypsy* (and Eva Perón in *Evita*). As Reno Sweeney in *Anything Goes*, LuPone delivered “a confident, self-assured woman who enjoys herself, as opposed to the bossy type”⁷⁴; David Sack’s review underlines the *naturally* temperamental actor’s personage LuPone publicly says she wants to present. However, the way she constructs her self-representation – especially, like Merman, through her language – incites the public perception of her actor’s personage as brassy, consciously or not – which, like Merman, offers LuPone a “wonderful living.”

When Merman portrayed Rose in *Gypsy*, Cointreau states that the role “shaped the way the public perceived who Ethel really was.”⁷⁵ As Caryl Flinn concludes, “Ironically, Merman’s ability to convince people that she was Madame Rose, in the standout performance of her career, convinced some that Ethel was not performing at all but was simply playing *herself*.⁷⁶ The audience, according to these comments, did not recognize Merman’s acting abilities but took her actor’s personage to be the real Merman. Even *Gypsy*’s playwright, Arthur Laurents, recalls that the way he knew Merman,⁷⁷ “made her right for Rose: not very bright, but shrewd, common but charismatic, able to defeat you before you could get a swipe at her and pure Rose, a walking, exuberant advertisement for Self-ignorance is bliss.”⁷⁸ In contrast, Sondheim might have recognized that Merman did not play herself when he observes, “What was remarkable was watching a woman who everybody assumed couldn’t act, act. Now, it’s a limited kind of acting. She didn’t quite understand what ‘Rose’s Turn’ was about.”⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Sacks, “She’s the Top.”

⁷⁵ Tony Cointreau cit. in Flinn, *Brass Diva: The Life and Legends of Ethel Merman*. 319.

⁷⁶ Ibid. 321.

⁷⁷ I would not speculate if Laurents knew more of Merman as her actor’s personage.

⁷⁸ Arthur Laurents cit. in Flinn, *Brass Diva: The Life and Legends of Ethel Merman*. 319.

⁷⁹ Stephen Sondheim cit. in Frank Rich, “Conversations with Sondheim,” *The New York Times Magazine*, no. March 12 (2000).

According to Graver, “the audience projects upon the figure they see on stage what they know (or think to know) about the life and career of the actor.”⁸⁰ He continues:

One might see in this body certain gestures repeated from role to role or the ghost of a particularly famous and successful earlier part. One might detect the effects of age, disease, or dissipation upon the actor’s performance skills or note the differences between the image of the actor projected on movie screens and the image he or she creates on stage. One might look for harmonious or jarring connections between incidents in the star’s life and the incidents portrayed in the drama.⁸¹

Merman’s actor’s personage and her portrayal of Rose, as her roles before, provoked the audience’s perception of Merman being like the character. Graver confirms that “the stories that constitute our understanding of a particular personage, that gives that personage his/her distinctive individual glow need not even to be true as long as they circulate and are embraced with adequate ardor and conviction.”⁸² Hence, if “the audiences inevitably read character through personage,”⁸³ it is the audience who confounds the actor’s personage and the actress portraying a character⁸⁴ with the character of the role itself.

The same happened to LuPone in her role as Eva Peròn in *Evita*. Although I agree with Graver, who states that “this personage body is not the real person behind the interpreter who is behind the performer who is behind the character,”⁸⁵ Merman and LuPone certainly reinforce the perception of their actor’s personages as brassy, and do this, more or less intentionally, in the service of their careers. Besides their vocal abilities, LuPone and Merman share another crucial trait as Broadway Belts: the image of being a woman who knows where she stands –

⁸⁰ Graver, “The Actor’s Bodies.” 163.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid. 164.

⁸³ David Graver cit. in Auslander, “Musical Personae.” 102.

⁸⁴ Just to remember, in Merman’s case, it is the *acting singer* portraying a character.

⁸⁵ Graver, “The Actor’s Bodies.” 164.

literally. “She steadily upstaged everybody,”⁸⁶ confirms Sondheim about Merman. “... I don’t think it was conscious. Ethel was not big on brains. But she sure knew her way around a stage, and it was all instinctive.”⁸⁷ Instinct or calculation, the *execution* was certainly part of the actor’s personage Merman created about herself.

When Graver says, that “personage, of whatever type or provenance, can assert a visibility on the stage that competes with the visibility of character, performer, interpreter, etc.,”⁸⁸ he underlines the importance of the actor’s personage for a performer to be a Broadway Belt. According to Stempel, Merman created the image of the brass(y) leading lady for the genre.⁸⁹ Thus, for LuPone following in Merman’s footsteps, to maintain the actor’s personage of the brassy lady remains crucial to be considered as a Broadway Belt, even when Broadway musical’s aesthetics changed significantly.

The image of the brassy lady existed already in vaudeville. An exceptional, natural vocal talent and an extroverted, “brassy” character – usually due to lower-class origins – became perceived as common attributes for belters as early as the end of the 19th century. For example, May Irwin and Stella Mayhew were perceived as brassy.⁹⁰ They preceded Sophie Tucker, who was considered a vaudeville “coon shouter” with a voice “big, resonant and brassy like an E flat horn,”⁹¹ and Fanny Brice as being “kind of loud and bold – raucous, very assertive, and not too friendly.”⁹² Consequently, the *label* given to vaudeville singers became inherited by succeeding leading ladies in Broadway musical theatre, like Merman and LuPone, even at the point that Mordden calls Merman’s voice, “the voice of the proletariat.”⁹³ Nevertheless, Merman and LuPone grew up in modest, church-orientated middle-class families, Merman

⁸⁶ Stephen Sondheim cit. in Rich, “Conversations with Sondheim.”

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Graver, “The Actor’s Bodies.” 164.

⁸⁹ Stempel, *Showtime – A History of the Broadway Musical Theater*. 416.

⁹⁰ Armond Fields, *Sophie Tucker: First Lady of Show Business* (Jefferson (NC), London: Mc Farland & Company, Inc., 2003). 37. And Banfield, “The Female Belt and Its Precursors.” 67.

⁹¹ Fields, *Sophie Tucker: First Lady of Show Business*. 37.

⁹² Herbert G. Goldman, *Fanny Brice – The Original Funny Girl* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). 190.

⁹³ Mordden, *Broadway Babies – The People Who Made The American Musical*. 115.

in Queens and LuPone in Northport on Long Island, and each lived a typical, well-protected childhood, while Tucker and Brice never made a secret of their origin from the lowbrow society.⁹⁴ According to Mordden, Merman “completes the arc begun in the rise of Fanny Brice.”⁹⁵ Here Mordden creates a social construct of what a Broadway belter’s actor’s personage should represent to become successful. He does not distinguish between the actor’s personage built by the Broadway Belt, the one assumed by creatives and critics, and the audience’s perception. So did Cole Porter, who saw Merman as “the link between Lily Pons and Mae West:⁹⁶ While Merman describes herself more as the successor to great vaudeville singers like Blossom Seeley, Odette Myrtle,⁹⁷ Sophie Tucker, and Grace Hayes,⁹⁸ Porter equates her talent for promoting herself to that of Pons and West.

As a successor of vaudeville belters, a Broadway Belt with a big voice portraying strong and independent women is unavoidably compared to her lower-class predecessors. As Graver states, “As with character the interiority and exteriority of personage are both open to scrutiny. Depending on the material from which personage is constructed, the interior of this body can be composed of personal history, public gossip, or a performing career.”⁹⁹ Indeed, when a Broadway Belt successfully portrays a brassy character, she finds herself labeled as the brassy lady with a loud voice, like a vaudeville belter. Since the audience and critics want the musical’s character and the belter’s actor’s personage both to be *real*, the Broadway Belt *creates* her actor’s personage to correspond to her roles in favor of her career. This self-presentation is thus a construction, and not necessarily real.

⁹⁴ I refer here to the comparison of biographical information about these artists from Merman and Eells, *Merman*. LuPone and Diehl, *Patti LuPone – A Memoir*. Norman Katkov, *Fabulous Fanny The Story of Fanny Brice* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1953). Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff, *Red Hot Mama – The Life of Sophie Tucker* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2018).

⁹⁵ Mordden, *Broadway Babies – The People Who Made The American Musical*. 114.

⁹⁶ Ibid. 115. Pons and West were both actresses famous for intensive self-promotion.

⁹⁷ There exist different spellings of her name: Odette Myrtle and Odette Myrtile. I have chosen the spelling used by *The New York Times* and the Al Hirschfeld Foundation.

⁹⁸ Merman and Eells, *Merman*. 23–24.

⁹⁹ Graver, “The Actor’s Bodies.” 164.

However, Stanley Godlovitch argues that “performance is a way of communicating, not especially a work or a composer’s notions, but a person, the performer, through music.”¹⁰⁰ If this would be the case for a Broadway Belt, her self-created, brassy image would be real and she would communicate her corresponding actor’s personage through her performance, in particular through her loud belt voice. Consequently, the Broadway Belt *would* be a brass(y) lady and belting a sound of the “proletariat” (to use Mordden’s words).

Taking a different view, Bruce Wilshire says, that “appearances are meaningful only because they are interpreted,”¹⁰¹ and, hence, pinpoints the myth about the brassy Broadway Belt: Audience and critics *interpret* a Broadway belter’s actor’s personage as brassy, due to her portrayal of a brassy character *combined* with her self-presentation as brassy (even though the latter might not be real).

Therefore, the image of a brassy lady often might correspond to a Broadway Belt, at least apparently. Yet for all this, there exist musical performers communicating their actor’s personage differently. This is especially the case when the focus of her talent lies not on a loud voice, but instead on her acting talent, as I will demonstrate in the next chapter.

3.1.2 The Versatile Actress, the Right Type, and a Total Identification

When a character actress becomes a Broadway Belt, her acting abilities and her actor’s personage are priorities, since her singing voice is not her primary asset. In 1963, Angela Lansbury received a letter from Arthur Laurents asking if she might be interested in doing a musical.¹⁰² According to Gottfried, at this point of her career, she had processed for ten years “visualizing [herself] singing like a bird and dancing like a dream.”¹⁰³ She was already a successful movie character actress with two

¹⁰⁰ Stanley Godlovitch, *Musical Performance – A Philosophical Study* (London: Routledge, 1998). 141.

¹⁰¹ Bruce Wilshire, *Role Playing and Identity: The Limits of Theatre as Metaphor* (Bloomington, Indiana: Bloomington University Press, 1982). 7.

¹⁰² Gottfried, *Balancing Act – The Authorized Biography of Angela Lansbury*. 133.

¹⁰³ Ibid. 134.

Oscar nominations, but directors did not “wave great parts in her face,”¹⁰⁴ despite her “huge”¹⁰⁵ reviews for the movie *The Manchurian Candidate*.¹⁰⁶ Thus, the forty-year-old actress said, she welcomed the chance to do Broadway musical theatre. Her first musical was *Anyone Can Whistle* by Laurens and Sondheim, which premiered in 1965 and closed after only nine performances.¹⁰⁷ However, Lansbury’s “ability to keep you interested in a very unsavory character”¹⁰⁸ in this musical was responsible for her audition for *Mame*. Jerry Herman, *Mame*’s composer, knew that he had found his *Mame* the moment he perceived Lansbury with “that combination of cool elegance and warmth.”¹⁰⁹ *Mame* became Lansbury’s first leading role and brought her Broadway stardom on which she created her legacy as a Broadway musical actress. Nevertheless, she was not the creative team’s first choice. Over a span of three years, she auditioned three times before she was chosen.¹¹⁰ In 1966, she became a “sensation as the original zesty, eccentric, extravagantly wealthy ‘Mame,’”¹¹¹ and played the part also in the 1983 revival. She recalls, “*Mame* is ageless. She is what every woman wants to be.”¹¹² However, that is not to say that Lansbury identified herself with *Mame* and created her actor’s personage on it. As Lansbury states, “I would not let myself fall into the campy pitfalls. … I kept the kernel of truth and played *Mame* as Madcap Polly – absolutely straight.”¹¹³ In terms of her public image, Lansbury was never considered to be *Mame* or to play *herself* by the audience and critics in the way seen with Ethel Merman and Mama Rose.

In contrast, Carol Channing was always reviewed as Channing (the actor’s personage as publicly perceived) and seen as playing “Channing”

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. 131.

¹⁰⁵ John Frankenheimer cit. in ibid. 131.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. 144.

¹⁰⁸ Jimmy Carr cit. in ibid. 152.

¹⁰⁹ Jerry Herman cit. in ibid. 154.

¹¹⁰ Ibid. 154, 158.

¹¹¹ Carol Lawson, “Broadway; Angela Lansbury and ‘Mame’ Just Can’t Stay Apart,” *The New York Times*, no. January 28 (1983): <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/01/28/theater/broadway-angela-lansbury-and-mame-just-can-t-stay-apart.html>.

¹¹² Angela Lansbury cit. in ibid.

¹¹³ Angela Lansbury cit. in Gottfried, *Balancing Act – The Authorized Biography of Angela Lansbury*. 183.

(the actor's personage portraying herself), besides being seen as an actress portraying a character.¹¹⁴ Dave Quinn cites one commentator in Channing's 2012 documentary, *Larger Than Life*: "Doesn't matter what the name of the character, it's always Carol,"¹¹⁵ said this unnamed reviewer, adding "that's what makes a star. Nobody ever says, 'Get me a Carol Channing type.' There aren't any."¹¹⁶ Completely typecast as Lorelei Lee by Anita Loos, the author of the 1925 comic novel *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, Channing became an instant star in the 1949 Broadway musical of Loos's novel.¹¹⁷ Channing's primary attributes were "her huge, saucer eyes, elastic smile, gravelly voice and buttercup hairdo."¹¹⁸ In 1964, her performance as Dolly Gallagher Levi in Jerry Herman's *Hello, Dolly!* cemented her stardom.¹¹⁹ Contrary to most Broadway stars, she did not search for the challenge of new character roles and considered herself "lucky to have two great roles in one career."¹²⁰ From 1964 on, she performed Dolly throughout her professional career and became known as "a real stage trouper who missed only one performance out of almost 5,000."¹²¹

According to Martin Gottfried, "audiences like their stars to play pet roles repeatedly, in an even more exaggerated style, no matter what show they are in. Carol Channing tried to resist that audience pressure ... but the audience didn't want that."¹²² Accepting the audience's wish, Channing stuck with that pet role, making it through her unique style completely her own, the part becoming almost synonymous with the

¹¹⁴ Jack Gould, "TV: Guests are Best at Carol Channing's Tea Party," *The New York Times* 2019, no. September 10 (1970): <https://www.nytimes.com/1970/09/10/archives/tv-guests-are-best-at-carol-channings-tea-party-gielgud-and.html>.

¹¹⁵ Dave Quinn, "Carol Channing's Most Legendary Moments: From Rapping at the Tonys to Hello, Dolly!," *People Magazine*, no. January 15 (2019), <https://people.com/theater/carol-channing-most-memorable-moments/>.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Wiegand, "Carol Channing, Star of Hello, Dolly! On Broadway, Dies Aged 97".

¹¹⁸ Ronald Bergan, "Carol Channing Obituary," *The Guardian*, no. January 15 (2019), <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2019/jan/15/carol-channing-obituary>.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Jay Handelman, "Behind the Scenes: Carol Channing was an Audience's Best Friend," *Herald Tribune*, no. January 15 (2019), <https://www.heraldtribune.com/news/20190115/behind-scenes-carol-channing-was-audiences-best-friend>.

¹²¹ Bergan, "Carol Channing Obituary".

¹²² Gottfried, *Balancing Act – The Authorized Biography of Angela Lansbury*. 183–184.

performer. However, limiting as that choice might be judged, by doing so, she was able to keep her star status alive until her death.

Contrary to Channing, Lansbury, the well-recognized character actress from the movies, was able to distance her actor's personage from the character she played, and audiences and critics agreed. "The actress in Angela Lansbury added a warmth and softness that made for a uniquely lovable chemistry of a role, an actor, and the audience,"¹²³ states Gottfried. "Miss Lansbury is a singing-dancing actress, not a singer or dancer who also acts,"¹²⁴ writes Stanley Kaufmann from *The New York Times*. This critic cemented Lansbury's status as an *actress* in Broadway musical theatre. From this moment on, she could search for more dramatic parts – and stepped into the footsteps of Merman as Rose in the 1973 London production of *Gypsy*.¹²⁵ However, she approached the part of Rose as an actress and did not venture into "dangerous Merman territory as a singer."¹²⁶ "She [Rose] has so many sides," Angela says, "that in the end you feel vitally sorry for her. She's a tragic figure."¹²⁷ As Laurens confirms, "A lot of my dialogue is elliptical – it has enormous subtext."¹²⁸ Although she won her third Tony Award for *Gypsy* (after *Mame* and *Dear World*), Gottfried points out a limitation in her portrayal: "Lansbury's humanity finally had no relevance for this character,"¹²⁹ states Gottfried, "Angela was valiant in putting actor's artistic energies into the role, but *Gypsy* was geared to a different kind of dynamism than *Mame*."¹³⁰

As opposed to Merman's roles, the big Broadway musical parts for Lansbury and Channing were not written for them. Lansbury portrayed *Gypsy*'s Rose in London's West End before bringing the show to Broadway, in order to avoid a direct comparison between her and Merman, while Channing became Dolly after Merman had turned the

¹²³ Ibid. 189.

¹²⁴ Stanley Kaufmann cit. in Brantley, *Broadway Musicals – From the Pages of The New York Times*. 210.

¹²⁵ Gottfried, *Balancing Act – The Authorized Biography of Angela Lansbury*. 220.

¹²⁶ Ibid. 220.

¹²⁷ Angela Lansbury cit. in ibid. 220.

¹²⁸ Arthur Laurens cit. in ibid. 221.

¹²⁹ Ibid. 223.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

part down.¹³¹ Even though the part of Dolly was originally written for Merman, Channing became identified with Dolly. Vincent Canby wrote about her starring – again – in the *Hello, Dolly!* revival in 1995, 29 years after the premiere of the show, “It’s just one role, but it’s Channing’s.”¹³² Calling Dolly *her* role might suggest that Canby (and the audience) perceived Channing as *being like* the character Dolly. In contrast, no Broadway musical character that Lansbury ever portrayed was considered as being *hers*. Including the portrayals of her movie career, Lansbury’s *versatility* as a character actress did not allow such an identification. In contrast, Channing’s Dolly can be seen as a mature Lorelei Lee, and thus the logical consequence as the next big part of her career. Nevertheless, Channing risked the same bad experience as LuPone with *Evita*. In her “memoir of sorts,” Channing recounts that she “auditioned for everything and everybody on or off-Broadway while living alone in New York.”¹³³ Thus, if her first big success had not been Lorelei Lee in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, she would have portrayed other roles, likely turning the perception of her and her actor’s personage in a completely different direction. “Many people have to have gone through the same experiences I have … trying for jobs, being rejected, walking home to a single room,”¹³⁴ she said. Thus she was primarily an actress searching for work and could have been cast as Mrs. Lovett or Rose. Nevertheless, it is hard to imagine her in such a portrayal. Stating that her voice “sounds like the character,”¹³⁵ she concedes that not only her actor’s personage, but even her voice matched her roles as Lorelei Lee and Dolly. She recognized her limitations, but also knew her advantage when she considers that her voice “could be squeaky high or bellowing bass,”¹³⁶ and that it “wasn’t always pretty, but it was effective.”¹³⁷ When Marge Champion, Gower Champion’s wife and dance partner, remembered that “[Channing] certainly was awkward and odd-looking, but

131 Merman and Eells, *Merman*. 218.

132 Vincent Canby cit. in Brantley, *Broadway Musicals – From the Pages of The New York Times*. 199.

133 Channing, *Just Lucky I Guess – A Memoir of Sorts*. 45.

134 Ibid. 47.

135 Handelman, “Behind the Scenes: Carol Channing was an Audience’s Best Friend”.

136 Ibid.

137 Ibid.

her warmth and wholesomeness came through,”¹³⁸ her description fits not only Channing but also Lorelei Lee and Dolly. Channing’s actor’s personage and Channing, the actress with an unconventional voice portraying a character, were predestined for these parts. She was the right *type* for such roles.

A different case is Lansbury portraying Nellie Lovett in Sondheim’s *Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street*. Regardless of the fact that Lansbury said she “had quit playing unlikable women a long time ago,”¹³⁹ she was attracted by the originality of the show.¹⁴⁰ As Gottfried states:

That is where Angela Lansbury, star of Broadway musicals, separated from the others,” states Gottfried. “It is unimaginable that Ethel Merman, Mary Martin, Barbra Streisand, or Carol Channing would have considered doing *Sweeney Todd*. Channing could have done it, probably quite marvelously, but she wouldn’t even have contemplated such a role. It was the actress in Angela who responded to the fascinating challenge, just as it was the star in Angela who took another step toward accepting that challenge.¹⁴¹

Gottfried here confirms not only Lansbury’s status as an actress looking for challenges but also more than hints at Channing sticking to parts corresponding to her actor’s personage. In contrast, for Lansbury, portraying Mrs. Lovett “would show Angie’s versatility,”¹⁴² said Sondheim. “It would let the world know that this lady could do more than swarm around and do Jerry Herman title numbers.”¹⁴³

Interestingly, LuPone succeeded Lansbury as Rose and as Mrs. Lovett. Thus LuPone could also be categorized as a belting *actress*, especially since she is a graduate of the Juilliard School’s inaugural drama

¹³⁸ Billboard.com, “Broadway Legend Carol Channing Dies at 97,” accessed August 13, 2019. <https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/obituary/8493617/carol-channing-dies-97-obituary>.

¹³⁹ Gottfried, *Balancing Act – The Authorized Biography of Angela Lansbury*. 230.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid. 231.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Stephen Sondheim cit. in ibid. 233.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

division class.¹⁴⁴ However, the perception of LuPone's actor's personage as brassy and her vocal abilities that are frequently compared to Merman's take precedence over her acting and cannot completely erase the typecasting effect of the part of Eva Perón.

According to Graver, “a discourse dating from Aristotle subordinates the actor to the character, suggesting that the actor's body like the playwright's word is little more than a medium with which the drama is built.”¹⁴⁵ The audience accepts Lansbury as the character actress who subordinates her actor's personage to the character. Lansbury credits her own talent for that: “It was all gift. Not hard work. You are born with it. Absolutely. Actors are not made, they are born. What they do with it, that's up to them.”¹⁴⁶ In contrast, when Atkinson says about Channing that “there has never been anything like this before in human society,”¹⁴⁷ and Canby declares that “it's possible this woman is a substance that should be legally controlled,”¹⁴⁸ Channing's actor's personage is put in the foreground, and not Channing the actress portraying a character. Her actor's personage, so often called “larger-than-life,” could not be overlooked when she portrayed a character. Thus the character *had* to fit her actor's personage, not vice versa. Nevertheless, Atkinson also recognizes her acting when he calls her rendition of Lorelei Lee “the most fabulous comic creation of this dreary period in history.”¹⁴⁹ Likewise, Howard Taubman, after the premiere of *Hello, Dolly!*, wrote that Channing performed “shrewdly mischievous”¹⁵⁰ and that “she can talk faster than

¹⁴⁴ Karen Heller, “Patti LuPone on Her ‘Painful’ Rise to Broadway Stardom: ‘I Was My Biggest Enemy!’” *The Washington Post*, no. April 6 (2017), https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/theater_dance/patti-lupone-on-her-painful-rise-to-broadway-stardom-i-was-my-biggest-enemy/2017/04/06/413c7c5a-13c3-11e7-adao-1489b735b3a3_story.html?noredirect=on.

¹⁴⁵ Graver, “The Actor's Bodies.” 158.

¹⁴⁶ Angela Lansbury cit. in Gottfried, *Balancing Act – The Authorized Biography of Angela Lansbury*. 309.

¹⁴⁷ Brooks Atkinson cit. in Brantley, *Broadway Musicals – From the Pages of The New York Times*. 129.

¹⁴⁸ Vincent Canby cit. in *ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ Brooks Atkinson cit. in *ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ Howard Taubman cit. in *ibid.* 196.

a con man without losing her big-eyed innocent gleam.”¹⁵¹ Contrary to Lansbury, Channing *promoted* her actor’s personage through her roles.

A different case from LuPone’s generation of Broadway belters is Bernadette Peters. Born a year before LuPone and, like her, following the Merman-Channing-Lansbury-legacy, Peters did not decide herself to have a career: She began appearing on television when she was only three years old and understudied the part of Dainty June in *Gypsy* on a national tour at the age of thirteen.¹⁵² Peters states, “I’ve got to be honest and say the career was my mother’s idea more than mine. … It was a hobby for me at that point. I was just play-acting.”¹⁵³ Since she was growing into show business, her actor’s personage was built a long time before her first Broadway success. Her first Tony nominations for *On the Town* (1972) and *Mack & Mabel* (1975), and her already acquired star status at the age of twenty-five, offered her the possibility to do professionally whatever she wanted to do. So, she turned to television and returned to Broadway only in 1983 for the role of Dot in Sondheim’s *Sunday in the Park with George*.¹⁵⁴ Since then, she has starred in more Sondheim musicals, like the revivals of *Follies*, *A Little Night Music*, and *Gypsy*, and originated the role of The Witch in *Into the Woods*.¹⁵⁵ Peters is considered to be “one of the finest Sondheim interpreters of our era.”¹⁵⁶ Nevertheless, she won her first Tony Award with Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *Song and Dance* in 1986. After this success, once again, she turned her back on Broadway and, by her own preference, appeared on the concert stage:¹⁵⁷ “There’s no fourth wall. Each song has an experience and I find the experience in my own life to match up with it. We bring on stage all the things that we are,”¹⁵⁸ says Peters, suggesting that

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Bernadette Peters, interview by Darryn King, 2013. <http://darrynking.com/2016/04/29/interview-bernadette-peters/>.

¹⁵³ Bernadette Peters cit. in ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Andrew Gans, “Diva Talk: Peters the Great — The London Concert,” *Playbill*, no. July 16 (1999), <https://www.playbill.com/article/diva-talk-peters-the-great-the-london-concert-com-102391>.

¹⁵⁷ Peters, “Interview: Bernadette Peters.”

¹⁵⁸ Bernadette Peters cit. in ibid.

her actor's personage represents herself (the real person, "in her own life"), at least in her concerts. Peters refers to the songs she has chosen to sing as "my children."¹⁵⁹ She discusses identifying with her roles, saying, "Every role I've played, I've thought – 'That's me. That's me!'"¹⁶⁰ and explains that "Every song has such a reason to be there. It's all very important. Every time I open my mouth to sing, she [Rose] really has something to say, something she *needs* to say."¹⁶¹ Hence, Peters seems to identify with each character she plays to the extent that each one seems to express her authentic self. Her self-created image for her actor's personage seems to be that the character corresponds to *her real self* in ways that shine through the role.

Although she says she considers each of her performances as a "deeply personal one,"¹⁶² connecting with the role and transferring it to "the experience in her own life," Peters also claims to be conscious of her learned skills. Having visited the Quintano School for Young Professionals in her childhood,¹⁶³ she gives notable credit to her professional training when she confirms: "I always say that my singing teacher gave me a gift, because what she gave me was a way to express myself."¹⁶⁴ Thus, Peters goes further in creating her image, suggesting that she uses learned skills as a *singer* to portray a character that reveals *her real self*. As her concert director Richard Jay-Alexander confirms: "Everyone loves her, but they don't know her. ... Nothing is an accident with Bernadette. It's all very deeply thought."¹⁶⁵

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Bernadette Peters cit. in Alexis Soloski, "Bernadette Peters: 'Every Role I've Played, I've Thought – That's Me!'" *The Guardian*, no. May 30 May (2019), <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2019/may/30/bernadette-peters-broadway-sondheim>.

¹⁶¹ Peters about playing Rose in the 2003 revival of *Gypsy* cit. in Andrew Gans, "From the Archives: Bernadette Peters Joined the Sisterhood of Roses With the 2003 *Gypsy* Revival," *Playbill*, no. May 23 (2019), <https://www.playbill.com/article/from-the-archives-bernadette-peters-joined-the-sisterhood-of-roses-with-the-2003-gypsy-revival-com-112839>.

¹⁶² Bernadette Peters cit. in ibid.

¹⁶³ American Theatre Wing, "Bernadette Peters," accessed November 30, 2019. <https://americantheatrewing.org/legends/bernadette-peters/>.

¹⁶⁴ Peters, "Interview: Bernadette Peters."

¹⁶⁵ Richard Jay-Alexander cit. in Alex Witchel, "Theater; A True Star, Looking For Places to Shine," *The New York Times*, no. February 28 (1999), <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/02/28/theater/theater-a-true-star-looking-for-places-to-shine.html>.

Hence, Peters is a Broadway Belt who is difficult to categorize: She is an actress like Lansbury and Channing, but while Channing was identified with the characters she played, Peters says that she herself identifies with them. She has a highly recognized singing voice, but, contrary to Merman or LuPone, she credits her voice teacher for developing that talent. Contrary to LuPone, her Italian origins do not guide her to outbursts or inappropriate language; she reserves being temperamental for the stage. As Graver states:

Unlike character, and particularly in the case of celebrities, however, the interior of personage is assumed to be much greater and more intriguingly complex than the audience could know, and the exterior is fetishized as a means of communing vicariously with the life hidden within.¹⁶⁶

In other words, Graver puts forth the idea that the performer possibly reveals a part of the real self through her actor's personage. In Peters's case, this would create a close connection to her audience, an audience that perceives her actor's personage as being always her real self, remaining the "young and cute, forever"¹⁶⁷ Bernadette – whether she sings in a concert or portrays a character.

3.1.3 The Dancing Broadway Belt and Her Hard-Knock Life

When it comes to the Broadway Belt, a dancer's career is much different from that of an actor or singer. As biographies show, the primary language of triple threats like Gwen Verdon, Chita Rivera, and Donna McKechnie is their body language, and singing and acting only became important later in their careers. Thus each of these performers was already recognized for being an "extraordinary dancer,"¹⁶⁸ and they just had to develop their acting and singing. They danced and worked "their

¹⁶⁶ Graver, "The Actor's Bodies." 158.

¹⁶⁷ Victoria Myers, "Bernadette Peters: Young and Cute, Forever and Never," *The Interval*, no. February 27 (2018), <https://www.theintervalny.com/features/2018/02/bernadette-peters-young-and-cute-forever-and-never/>.

¹⁶⁸ Shelley, *Gwen Verdon – A Life on Stage and Screen*. Pos. 29.

ass off,” and “loved it,” to re-cite Rivera. Certainly, the audience loves them primarily for their dancing talent, and that talent tends to stay in the focus; even though they had to combine their dancing with acting and singing, their successful character roles are always dance-related. Verdon tried once to do a “straight” part, in 1972 in the play *Children! Children!*, but it was such a flop that it closed on opening night.¹⁶⁹ After that experience, she returned to Broadway musical theatre and limited her straight acting to supporting roles, in film and television guest appearances.¹⁷⁰

Rivera never tried to escape *the dancer’s life*, which became the title of her one-woman show, as mentioned before.¹⁷¹ However, for Rivera, dancing needs to meld with acting. “You have to act. Be a person. You have to be truthful through the choreography. It’s not just technical steps. Choreography comes out of emotion. It’s dialogue without words.”¹⁷² In a traditional theatre setting, dancing – like classical singing, as a learned skill – creates “both physical and psychic distance between the performers and the spectators,”¹⁷³ states Susan Au. In contrast, the character actress with a belt voice that “works” for the part, and the singer with a big voice “selling” the role, are much easier considered a Broadway Belt than any dancer.

Although some elite Broadway dancers became recognized Broadway belters, and musicals like *A Chorus Line* put the dancer into the focus, dancing should be considered as just another layer of the artistic personage of a Broadway Belt, to use Auslander’s expression. Concerning her role as Cassie in *A Chorus Line*, McKechnie states, “It was designed for my personality and designed for the way I dance. Michael left so much of the interpretation to me. It’s all acting based.”¹⁷⁴ In other

¹⁶⁹ Ibid. Pos. 49. That not to say that the flop was Verdon’s responsibility.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid. Pos. 60.

¹⁷¹ Andrew Gans, “Chita Rivera: The Dancer’s Life Opens at the Old Globe,” *Playbill*, no. September 22 (2005), <http://www.playbill.com/article/chita-rivera-the-dancers-life-begins-old-globe-run-sept-10-com-127938>.

¹⁷² Chita Rivera cit. in Shapiro, *Nothing Like A Dame – Conversations with the Great Women of Musical Theater*. Pos. 889.

¹⁷³ Susan Au, *Ballet & Modern Dance* (London, New York: Thames and Hudson, 1988). 23.

¹⁷⁴ Donna McKechnie cit. in Shapiro, *Nothing Like A Dame – Conversations with the Great Women of Musical Theater*. Pos. 1667.

words, McKechnie's actor's personage, the one her audience could perceive, is a combination of her actor's personage as seen by the creators, how she presented herself, *and* her dance style. Even though her primary asset is dancing, it *served* the acting and singing and became subordinated to them. About dancing, McKechnie even goes as far as saying, "I thought it was keeping me from achieving, from getting singing and acting roles."¹⁷⁵ Elite dancers like Verdon, Rivera, and McKechnie will always concentrate on serving the character's development by *acting through their dancing*. Verdon confirms in her last interview in 2004 that the only time dancing was truly fulfilling for her was in shows that Fosse directed and choreographed because Fosse believed that you have to act to dance.¹⁷⁶

The triple threat in Broadway musical theatre can only become a recognized Broadway Belt when her belting abilities – based on natural talent or taught – are strong enough to *merge* with her acting-through-dancing qualities. The character is generally *designed* for the respective actor's personage and her dance style. In revivals, the actor's personage needs to correspond to that of the original performer to complete the picture. Thus the triple threat is generally limited to roles in which her primary asset, being an accomplished dancer, is strongly necessary. The triple threat as a Broadway Belt has its own repertoire of roles.

3.1.4 The Broadway Belt after 1980

The changing aesthetics of Broadway musical theatre after *A Chorus Line* (1975) provoked a situation where the Broadway Belt was pushed aside from her star position in favor of the show: When with *Cats* (1981) and *Les Misérables* (1985) *megamusicals* came alive, the Broadway Belt slowly became just another artistic element of the show, as one of four to eight equally important leading characters, or in a supporting role. Even though in *Cats* the part of Grizabella stands out with at least one

¹⁷⁵ Ibid. Pos. 1481.

¹⁷⁶ From Rick McKay's documentary *Broadway: The Golden Age, By the Legends Who Were There*. (2004) cit. in Shelley, *Gwen Verdon – A Life on Stage and Screen*. Pos. 3815.

song, “Memory,” the part is considered to be a *featured role*, as is the case for the character Eponine in *Les Mis*, who dies as early as at the beginning of act two. Contrary to a supporting role, a featured role can easily be cut because it is not crucial for the storyline. Serendipitously, like “Memory” in Cats, Eponine’s song “On my Own” became a recognized belt song; not only was it not cut, it became an expected landmark within the *Les Mis* experience, and promising Broadway belters can continue to portray this character.

The audience of megamusicals primarily wants to see the show, and thus the show does not *need* a star. Grace Barnes laments:

The great female roles that defined musicals such as *Mame*, ... *Gypsy*, ... *Evita*, ... have all but disappeared, overtaken by the Valjeans, Mormons, the boys of the Four Seasons, newsboys, boxers, ballet dancers, bodyguards, and an assortment of drag queens, or by the show itself, now marketed as the primary attraction.¹⁷⁷

Wicked is an exception and catapulted Idina Menzel to stardom as a Broadway Belt. Nevertheless, Grace Barnes continues:

The one thing there is no room for within the jukebox¹⁷⁸/megamusicals brand is the star. Once the initial excitement of who is playing the lead in the original production – Jonathan Pryce in the original *Miss Saigon* or Idina Menzel in *Wicked* – has died down, the stars are replaced from a seemingly endless pool of lesser-known performers. ... the jukebox and the megamusicals do not rely on a household name to keep them running.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁷ Barnes, *Her Turn on Stage: The Role of Women in Musical Theatre*. 9.

¹⁷⁸ A jukebox musical is a musical based on songs of popular music; for example, *Mamma Mia!* (1999, exclusively based on ABBA songs), *We Will Rock You* (2002, with Queen’s music), *Jersey Boys* (2005, based on music by The Four Seasons, featuring the frontman Frankie Valli), *The Cher Show* (2018, based on the professional career and music of Cher), and *Tina: The Musical* (2018/2019, a biographical musical about the life of Tina Turner, featuring her songs), to name just a few.

¹⁷⁹ Barnes, *Her Turn on Stage: The Role of Women in Musical Theatre*. 35.

The end-of-20th-century generation after LuPone, Peters, and McKechnie, and the 21st-century generation of Broadway belters, suffers from this changed aesthetics: On one side, from the general necessity to be an accomplished triple threat in leading roles, on the other side from being pushed aside, only playing featured roles in megamusicals. The unconventional actor's personage of a Broadway Belt became undesirable for the producers of Broadway musicals and their creative teams. "The ease with which new actors are slotted into the worldwide reproductions is a clear message to performers – you are not Mary Martin, Julie Andres, Chita Rivera or Patti LuPone. You are replaceable,"¹⁸⁰ states Barnes. To be replaceable, the Broadway Belt has to *fit in*, with the perfect combination of her talents in singing, acting, and dancing. Outshining actor's personages, extraordinary dancers, and big, loud voices are not wanted for a long-running show. Today's Broadway belters in megamusicals generally are so insignificant for the public eye, that it is sometimes difficult to find any information about them on the World Wide Web. They mainly exist through the roles they are playing, even though the audience might remain more or less interested in the person behind the character. However, without promoting an interesting actor's personage, the Broadway Belt risks disappearing from the memory of the audience immediately after they leave the theater. As Barnes puts it, "Can anyone name the current star of the Broadway productions of *Jersey Boys* or *Spiderman*?"¹⁸¹ Only personal fans of a specific performer who is part of the show could answer this question with "Yes."

Although Broadway belters today still impersonate strong independent women on stage, off-stage they are rarely known for taking any political or social position like LuPone, Merman, Channing, or even Lansbury.¹⁸² This "new" Broadway Belt image creates a contradiction to everything the 20th-century actor's personage of an elite Broadway Belt stands for. I do not intend to criticize how today's Broadway belters promote themselves. I just want to suggest that an actor's personage that interests the audience on- *and* offstage is necessary to create star status

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² I will discuss this point more intensively in chapter 3.4, Belting and Feminism.

for a belter, and that star status is necessary to become recognized as a Broadway Belt and to have a life-long career as such. Otherwise, the risk is high to be lost behind today's general interest in easily accessible *celebrities* on YouTube and Instagram.

To close my discourse: The elite Broadway Belt of the 20th century possesses an idiosyncratic actor's personage, which labels her and makes her unique and, in this way, *interesting* for the audience. Although certainly chosen by a creative team for their talent (and without talent, unable to become stars), it is their *unconventional actor's personage*, be it brassy, elegant-reserved, quirky, cute, or defined through the perfect combination of dancing, acting, and belting, which made them stars of a certain elevated stature. Either the creative team writes a star vehicle for the Broadway Belt, or the Broadway Belt fits perfectly into what the creators have written: This close relationship is responsible for some of the most iconic female characters in Broadway musical theatre history and formed the identity of a Broadway Belt.

These musicals allow the Broadway Belt to put her stamp on the role, contrary to megamusicals where the roles "have tended to stamp the actors who perform them."¹⁸³ Do these kinds of shows still exist? "The playwrights are out there, and I think the producers are out there. It's just a question of economics and support,"¹⁸⁴ says LuPone. "It's always about the audience. I mean, I'm mad when I come out of a theater, and it's mediocre, and I've spent 300 bucks. I'm furious. ... It's a higher-stake game now, and everybody has to be on the top of their game."¹⁸⁵ It is the demanding audience that makes a star of a Broadway belter, who needs an actor's personage the audience is interested in. Since megamusicals are not supposed to depend on a star anymore, the audience can only offer a short-time star status. As a show like *Wicked* proves, as soon as a new Broadway musical with an elite belter in a leading role premieres, the audience calls for a new Broadway star. Such opportunities would be *essential* to keep the legacy of the 20th century's Broadway Belt

¹⁸³ Stempel, *Showtime – A History of the Broadway Musical Theater*. 627.

¹⁸⁴ Patti LuPone cit. in Dave Itzkoff, "Don't Dare Cry for These Old Friends," *The New York Times*, no. November 10 (2011), <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/13/theater/questions-for-patti-lupone-and-mandy-patinkin.html>.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

alive. However, without creating an unconventional actor's personage, as soon as the original belter leaves the long-running show, the general audience loses interest and only her most loyal fans keep record.

Interestingly, between 1990 and 2019, Tonys for Best Performance by a Leading Actress in a Musical are more often awarded to a leading lady in a *revival* than in a new Broadway musical: 17 times for a revival and 13 times for a new musical production.¹⁸⁶ Contrary to elite Broadway belters who became stars by *originating* a role, some careers of 21st century Broadway belters have been forged by a Tony for a part in a revival. For example, Bebe Neuwirth won two Tonys for *Sweet Charity* and *Chicago*, Sutton Foster for *Thoroughly Modern Millie* and *Anything Goes*, Christine Ebersole won one Tony for *42nd Street*, Cynthia Erivo for *The Color Purple*, and Bette Midler for *Hello, Dolly!*.¹⁸⁷ Consequently, their star status is based on their talent in a *comparable* high-quality performance to the original, not an original itself, which underlines the lack of *new, original* star vehicles. Originating in a star vehicle offered to the 20th century elite Broadway belters the opportunity to create their actor's personage. The next chapter highlights the relationship between the Broadway Belt, her star vehicle, and the creative team behind it.

3.2 The Star and Her Vehicle

The highest achievement of an elite Broadway belter is to originate a role in a new Broadway musical. A new show can be written for her, being developed in cooperation with the creative team, or the artist might be *discovered* by just being at the right time in the right place, presenting her talent to the right people. Reinforcing Graver's point, Robert Viagas states that "stardom on Broadway has come to be defined as a mixture of high achievement, sustained achievement, extraordinary achievement, a unique achievement, achievement despite personal adversity, and achievement through personal charisma."¹⁸⁸ What Viagas calls

¹⁸⁶ Tony Award * Productions, "Tony Award Winners," accessed August 28, 2019. <https://www.tonyawards.com/history/year-by-year/>.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Robert Viagas, *I'm the Greatest Star – Broadway's Top Musical Legends from 1900 to Today* (Milwaukee, WI: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2009). Pos. 22–28.

charisma corresponds to the *actor's personage*. Thus Viagas confirms that a Broadway star reaches achievement through talent and a strong actor's personage. He even goes further, explaining, "Stars attract the eye. They could be dressed in a sack; when they walk into a crowded room there is something in their bearing that causes everyone to *watch*. Something in their very breathing fascinates us."¹⁸⁹ To attract the eye *offstage*, the Broadway Belt generally needs, first of all, the success in a Broadway musical on a Broadway stage. The (future) star needs a star vehicle.

Looking into Broadway musical theatre history, it becomes clear that *star theatre* changed drastically after World War II, as movies, television, and the concert stage became the center of star production.¹⁹⁰ Nevertheless, the era of Broadway's so-called Golden Age continued until 1964's *Fiddler on the Roof*. Then the book musical's general impact on Broadway musical theatre began to fade away.¹⁹¹ The theatre district around 42nd street and Broadway nearly disappeared in the late 1960s and, according to Jessica Sternfeld, "critics declared Broadway dead or dying."¹⁹² In 1987, Gerald Mast commented that "Broadway has been dying for so long, even the last decade's flops look good,"¹⁹³ and Mark Grant claims in 2004 that "the American musical peaked as an art form during a forty-year golden age on Broadway that ended almost forty years ago."¹⁹⁴ Nevertheless, Michelle Dvoskin concludes:

If musicals actually died in the late 1960s, critics in the 1980s or 2000s would have little to complain about – either the form would have been resurrected, in which case things would have improved, or the form would still be dead, which wouldn't be a very interesting topic.¹⁹⁵

¹⁸⁹ Ibid. Pos. 28.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid. Pos. 37.

¹⁹¹ *Oklahoma!* is generally considered to be the beginning of the golden age, while *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964) serves as a popular finale of the era. See Michelle Dvoskin, "The Postwar Musical," in *The Oxford Handbook of American Drama*, ed. Jeffrey H. Richards and Heather S. Nathans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). 392. However, *Oklahoma!* completes the evolution *Showboat* had begun as early as 1927. Preceded by musicals like *Lady in the Dark* (1941) and *On Your Toes* (1936), *Oklahoma!* united all new innovations since 1927.

¹⁹² Jessica Sternfeld cit. in ibid. 392.

¹⁹³ Gerald Mast cit. in ibid. 393.

¹⁹⁴ Mark Grant cit. in ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

During the 1980s and 1990s, theaters were refurbished, a younger generation became the new audience despite higher ticket prices, and a new generation of Broadway stars appeared on stage.¹⁹⁶ While in the new millennium, television shows like “America’s Got Talent” and “Star Search” became responsible for a completely different definition of the term “star” in the entertainment industry in general,¹⁹⁷ the *Broadway musical star* is still defined by multiple achievements through talent, and that over life-long careers. As Broadway musical theatre history shows, the Broadway musical changed its aesthetics multiple times over the span of a century. However, the elite Broadway belters of the 20th and early 21st centuries have one thing in common: Every Broadway Belt of her era, like Ethel Merman starting in the 1930s or Idina Menzel reaching stardom in 1996 as Maureen Johnson in *Rent*, appears in a star vehicle with a signature role catapulting her to stardom. At the same time, the Broadway Belt originating such a role is at least as responsible for the success of the show as its creative team. This chapter explores in a discourse analysis the relationship between the elite Broadway Belt and the creators of her star vehicle, which is responsible for her stardom.

3.2.1 The Broadway Belt, the Musicals and the Creatives

When a Broadway Belt receives a Tony Award as best actress in a *new* musical, generally the respective musical and its creatives receive a Tony, too, or, at least, are nominated.¹⁹⁸ Thus examining the origins of the *Tony Awards* would be worthwhile. The 1st Annual Tony Awards were

¹⁹⁶ Viagas, *I'm the Greatest Star – Broadway's Top Musical Legends from 1900 to Today*. Pos. 37.

¹⁹⁷ The search in television programs for unknown, even untrained and uneducated talents, defines the term star mainly as a *rising star*, with an emphasis on a star to be *discovered*, in contrast to an *established star* with “stardom through achievement.”

¹⁹⁸ There are exceptions. For example, when in 1957, not only winners, but also nominations became publicly known, Merman was nominated for *Happy Hunting*, but the musical was not; likewise, in 1981, Chita Rivera was nominated for *Bring Back Birdie*, but the musical was not. See Morrow, *The Tony Award Book – Four Decades of Great American Theater*. 222, 254–255.

presented on April 6, 1947, in New York's Waldorf Astoria Hotel.¹⁹⁹ The prize is named after Antoinette "Tony" Perry, an actress born in 1888 in Denver, Colorado.²⁰⁰ According to Lee Allan Morrow, Perry was a pioneer as "one of the most prolific and important female directors in America"²⁰¹ at a time when directing still was "a man's job."²⁰² In 1939, she joined Rachel Crothers and a group of other theatre women and created the *American Theatre Wing War Service*, which devoted itself "at first to the same charitable duties it had performed throughout the First World War."²⁰³ The *Stage Door Canteen*²⁰⁴ venue became the most famous activity of the organization, welcoming millions of servicemen during the Second World War.²⁰⁵ Even Broadway stars did not hesitate to lend a hand as canteen workers.²⁰⁶ Perry became the Chairman of the Board and Secretary of the American Theatre Wing during the war.²⁰⁷ She committed herself to the Wing's work, and ended her career reasoning, "I guess I'm just a fool about the theatre."²⁰⁸ The *Antoinette Perry Memorial Award* became the annual Tony Award, "a living and self-renewing annual award by theater people for theater people."²⁰⁹ Over the years, the *Tony* – the award's name is usually just used in this short form – fast became the most crucial award for Broadway plays and musicals and anyone working in, for, and behind them.²¹⁰ During the last decade, the

¹⁹⁹ *The Tony Award Book – Four Decades of Great American Theater* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1987). 215.

²⁰⁰ Ibid. 20.

²⁰¹ Ibid. 23.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ The American Theatre Wing War was originally the "Stage Women's War Relief," founded by Rachel Crothers in 1917. Crothers reawakened the organization in 1939 as a branch of the British War Relief Society. The Wing became independent from the British War Relief Society when America entered the war. See *ibid.* 13.

²⁰⁴ "The movie, *The Stage Door Canteen*, features a serviceman who falls in love with a canteen hostess. The forgettable story is just a hook on which to hang the many cameo appearances of various stars. More important, 91.4 percent of the film's profits went to the Wing for support of the canteen. The canteen closed after the war in 1946. See *ibid.* 16, 19.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.* 14.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.* 14.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.* 23.

²⁰⁸ Antoinette Perry cit. in *ibid.*

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.* 24.

²¹⁰ Ken Bloom, *Broadway – Its History, People, and Places* (New York: Routledge 2004).

531.

public discussion about the number of nominated and winning female creatives and performers, especially the number of African-American actors and actresses, has demonstrated the importance of the Tonys.²¹¹ The achievement of being nominated for or winning a Tony is crucial for the evolution of integration and equal rights for women in the Broadway musical industry. Antoinette Perry, an inspiring, self-conscious, independent female professional in a man's industry corresponds quite well to the image of a Broadway Belt.²¹² Thus, for a Broadway Belt, winning a Tony or being a Tony nominee is not just receiving honors for achievement. It is the ultimate proof of professional female achievement in American theatre outside serious plays and opera.

The success of a Broadway Belt involves, automatically, the creatives' work. Remembering from chapter 3.1., *The Actor's Personage – The Broadway Belt Behind the Role*, that the elite Broadway Belt of the 20th century was generally chosen by the creatives during the creation of a new musical, and that the character was *designed*, adapted, or even written for her, the close connection between the Broadway Belt and the creatives around the performer's signature role is significant. My research brought me to the finding that only four composers are responsible for the most Tony wins and nominations and/or the crowning achievements of the iconic elite Broadway belters of the 20th century: Jule Styne, Jerry Herman, Stephen Sondheim, and John Kander. Together with their creative teams, these four composers bear major responsibility for the development of belting in Broadway musical theatre during the 20th century and beyond.

²¹¹ Many articles and blogs about the subject can be found on the World Wide Web, for example Purcell, "Has Broadway Discovered ... Feminism?"; or Zoe Haylock, "Tonys: A Look Back At Black Actors Who Have Won," *The Hollywood Reporter*, no. June 10 (2018), <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/lists/black-tony-awards-acting-winner-1098725>.

²¹² Women's position, especially that of Broadway belters, in the male-dominated world of Broadway musical theatre will be a subject of chapter 3.4.

3.2.2 John Kander and Fred Ebb – The Songwriting Team for the Triple Threat

In 1962, John Kander teamed up with Fred Ebb to become one of the most successful Broadway musical songwriting teams with eight Tony nominations and four wins.²¹³ While their first Broadway musical, *Flora, the Red Menace*, closed after only 87 performances on July 24, 1965,²¹⁴ its leading lady, nineteen-year-old Liza Minelli, won the *Tony for Best Performance by a Leading Actress in a Musical*.²¹⁵ Already a recording and concert artist with a celebrity status due to her famous parents, Judy Garland and Vincente Minelli, the Tony catapulted Minelli into the position of a rising singing, *and* dancing, *and* acting star.²¹⁶ Minelli confirmed her star status by winning the Academy Award in 1973 for the movie adaption of the 1966 Kander and Ebb Broadway musical *Cabaret*,²¹⁷ her second Tony as lead actress for the Kander and Ebb Musical *The Act* in 1978, and a third Tony nomination as Second Lead Actress for *The Rink*, another Kander and Ebb musical, in 1984.²¹⁸ Minelli also replaced Gwen Verdon from August 8, 1975, to September 13, 1975, as Roxie Hart in *Chicago*, the Kander and Ebb musical nominated for a Tony in 1976.²¹⁹ According to Kander, Minelli's celebrity status did not influence the creative team to choose her for *Flora, the Red Men-*

²¹³ Stanley Green, *The World of Musical Comedy: The Story of the American Musical Stage as Told through the Careers of Its Foremost Composers and Lyricists* (New York: Da Capo, 1984). 331.

²¹⁴ The Broadway League, "Flora, the Red Menace," accessed August 28, 2019. <https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-show/flora-the-red-menace-3608>.

²¹⁵ Tony Award * Productions, "Tony Award Winners".

²¹⁶ Minelli is a four-time Tony winner and a one-time nominee. Although Minelli has a crucial responsibility for a worldwide awakening of interest in Broadway musicals, I did not mention her until this point because I do not consider her to be a *Broadway Belt*. Her career began and continues as a concert singer and movie actress. Minelli's occasional appearances on a Broadway stage throughout the years were all short-time engagements, concerts, or replacements for Broadway stars. It is, nevertheless, crucial to mention her in this chapter about stars and their star-vehicles.

²¹⁷ Internet Movie Database, "Liza Minelli Awards," accessed August 28, 2019. <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0591485/awards>.

²¹⁸ Tony Award * Productions, "Tony Award Winners".

²¹⁹ The Broadway League, "Chicago," accessed March 27, 2020. <https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-show/chicago-9942>.

ace: She was not initially involved, the musical was not written for her, and Ebb and Kander did not perform any courtesy for Minelli. Kander remembers:

While we were writing *Flora*, a friend of Fred's asked us to meet this girl that she thought was very talented. ... and a seventeen-year-old girl arrived on the doorstep. ... And we've been together ever since. She came in, looked at the things we were writing for Flora, and immediately sang them gorgeously.²²⁰

Thus neither Kander (and Ebb) chose Minelli, the rising star, nor Minelli the songwriting freshmen, Kander and Ebb. They were just *right* for each other. As Kander states:

One of the nice things about writing for Liza is that you don't have to write for Liza. She can do anything. You know that whatever you do write, she's going to deliver it exactly the way you intended it. It's really the same with Chita Rivera, the other woman in our lives. Both of them are wonderfully disciplined performers. We write and they sing.²²¹

Concerning Broadway musical theatre, Broadway Belt Chita Rivera was even more involved with Kander and Ebb than Minelli. Their more-than-lifelong cooperation in Broadway musicals²²² began in 1970 on *Zorba*,²²³ followed by *Chicago* in 1975.²²⁴ Eight-time Tony nominee and three-time Tony winner Rivera won two of her Tonys as the lead actress for Kander and Ebb's 1984 production of *The Rink* and for *Kiss of the*

²²⁰ John Kander cit. in Bryer and Davison, *The Art of the American Musical – Conversations with the Creators*. 100.

²²¹ John Kander cit. in ibid. 102.

²²² In 2015, nine years after Ebb's death, Rivera was Tony Nominee for *Best Performance by a Leading Actress in a Musical* in Kander and Ebb's *The Visit*. See The Broadway League, "Chita Rivera," accessed August 30, 2019. <https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-cast-staff/chitarivera-57887>.

²²³ "Past Productions: Zorba," accessed June 11, 2020. <http://www.chitarivera.com/productions/zorba.htm>.

²²⁴ "Past Productions: Chicago," accessed June 11, 2020. <http://www.chitarivera.com/productions/chicago.htm>.

Spiderwoman in 1992.²²⁵ *The Rink* signifies the Kander-Ebb-Minelli-Rivera-relationship at its best. According to Ebb, “there up on stage were two of my best friends, Liza and Chita. It was an overwhelming experience.”²²⁶ Kander said about Minelli (who was the second lead on Rivera’s side),²²⁷ “I don’t think that anybody could have played it any better than she did.”²²⁸ Minelli idolizes Rivera when she states that “Chita was the first person I ever saw on Broadway, and, in *Bye Bye Birdie*, she’s the one who made me decide what I wanted to do.”²²⁹ She also remembers them working together in *Chicago* (when Minelli replaced Verdon for five weeks) and that Rivera and she were “joined at the hip.”²³⁰ As Harry Haun writes, “Ever since, they’ve been looking for another excuse to co-star.”²³¹ Although Minelli is a much bigger star, these comments show her respect for Rivera, independently of celebrity status. Between them, it was all about recognition of talent.

For any triple threat, a high-class choreographer is essential to reach such an achievement. Kander and Ebb collaborated with some successful, if difficult, choreographers, which made the rehearsal process not always easy. As Kander recalls:

If you’re in a good collaboration – and sometimes we have been, fortunately – there’s a lot of conversation between the choreographer and the composer, as well as the general conversation, particularly in terms of what the style is going to be. … More often than not, you give a choreographer his or her freedom to go ahead and do what he wants.²³²

²²⁵ Tony Award * Productions, “Tony Award Winners”.

²²⁶ Fred Ebb cit. in Bryer and Davison, *The Art of the American Musical – Conversations with the Creators*. 108.

²²⁷ Ibid. 109.

²²⁸ John Kander cit. in *ibid.* 109.

²²⁹ Liza Minelli cit. in Haun, “Read the Original 1984 Interview with Liza Minnelli and Chita Rivera in Rehearsals for *The Rink!*”.

²³⁰ Liza Minelli cit. in *ibid.*

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Bryer and Davison, *The Art of the American Musical – Conversations with the Creators*. 110.

Hence, notably, when it comes to the triple threat, the creative development of the show into a prize-winning star vehicle goes beyond the relationship between the artist and the composer/playwright/lyricist team – but with more relationships becomes more chances for conflict, which in some cases can become an emotional challenge as much for the performer as for the creative team, as was the case here, working with Bob Fosse. Kander confirms the difficult cooperation on *Chicago*, but remembers, “We were fortunate in that we also had Chita Rivera. . . . The three of us held each other up a lot during that time.”²³³ Ebb recalls working with Fosse and Verdon on *Chicago*: “They both were geniuses, I think. . . . Despite it all, I have to say I loved them.”²³⁴ Although the close connection between the creative team and their leading ladies is fundamental, a dancer as the leading lady needs an outstanding choreographer to put her primary talent into focus.

The close personal relationship did not lead to an exclusive collaboration of Minelli and Rivera with Kander and Ebb. All three parties worked with other creatives throughout their careers.²³⁵ Nevertheless, they made Broadway musical theatre history together: Minelli, Verdon, and Rivera set the standard for the triple threat, even before *A Chorus Line* won the Tony for best musical in 1976 over *Chicago*.²³⁶ Still today, Broadway belters continue to star in *Cabaret* and *Chicago*, two of the most iconic Broadway musicals for a triple threat with a high-quality belt voice.²³⁷

Kander and Ebb wrote musicals with strong independent characters for their leading ladies. However, these characters are not middle-aged dames or mothers; they are younger career women, usually in a social environment of theaters, clubs, and bars: Flora in *Flora, the Red Menace*

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Fred Ebb cit. in ibid. 111.

²³⁵ For further information see The Broadway League, “John Kander,” accessed August 29, 2019. <https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-cast-staff/john-kander-6837>. Or, “Chita Rivera”. Internet Movie Database, “Liza Minelli Awards”.

²³⁶ *A Chorus Line* established the triple threat for the complete cast, while *Cabaret* and *Chicago* concentrate on the lead character.

²³⁷ The 1996 Broadway revival of *Chicago* is still running in March 2020, and the fourth revival of *Cabaret* ended in 2015. See The Broadway League, “Cabaret,” accessed August 30, 2019. <https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-show/cabaret-2338>. “Chicago”.

is a fashion designer and member of an artists' cooperative of dancers, musicians and designers; in *Cabaret*, Sally Bowles is a singer/dancer in the Kit-Kat Night Club; and in *Chicago*, both leading ladies portray singing murderesses, heading for a career in vaudeville. While the singing is so demanding that LuPone or Peters could have been considered for *Chicago*,²³⁸ the necessary dancing abilities are unreachable for a mover; the choreography for these roles calls for trained dancers.²³⁹ Remembering from chapter 3.i.3, *The Dancing Broadway Belt and Her Hard-Knock Life*, that the triple threat can only become a recognized Broadway Belt if her belting nearly equals her acting-through-dancing, the question for shows like *Chicago* is whether she was primarily chosen as a dancer or a performer.

Choreography generally begins to be crucial in the creation of a musical when rehearsals begin. Consequently, if Minelli and Rivera had not been accomplished dancers when they auditioned, but were still the “disciplined performers”²⁴⁰ who delivered the role exactly the way Kander and Ebb intended it,²⁴¹ it would have been possible that Sally, Roxie, and Velma could be portrayed by singers or actresses, and a triple threat would not be necessary. Although this remains speculative, I would argue that Kander and Ebb had found their soulmates or “partners in crime” in Minelli and Rivera to bring these musicals on a Broadway stage,²⁴² and the fact that they are trained dancers was just the cherry on the cake, fulfilling Kander and Ebb’s intentions for these parts just perfectly. Although they did not create *Flora* or *Zorba* especially for Minelli or Rivera, Kander and Ebb had nevertheless found the perfect match for their creative style. They stuck together like a happily

²³⁸ For example, “Nowadays,” “Roxie,” “Class,” and “All That Jazz” are recognized, highly demanding belt songs.

²³⁹ That not to say that movers are not trained in dancing, but, a couple of years taking dance lessons generally cannot replace the training of an accomplished dancer.

²⁴⁰ John Kander cit. in Bryer and Davison, *The Art of the American Musical – Conversations with the Creators*. 102.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² *Chicago* could be seen in a different light: Since Verdon had the rights to the play *Chicago*, written by Maurine Dallas Watson in 1926, and she was interested in a big part for herself at the end of her dancing career, *Chicago* became necessarily a dance musical. At this time, in 1975, Kander and Ebb worked with Rivera for at least 6 years and probably knew in advance that Rivera would be the right match for the role of Velma, to star side by side with Verdon.

married couple (to stretch the simile) and this relationship is at least partially responsible for the success of *The Rink* and *Chicago*. These musicals are not what Ethan Mordden calls “the Big Lady Show,”²⁴³ but they need a triple threat to star in them as much as the accomplished triple threat needs these shows to keep up her legacy as a Broadway Belt.

3.2.3 Jerry Herman, Composer and Lyricist – The Creator of Show Tunes

When it comes to the creation of a “Big Lady” show, there is one person to name first: composer and lyricist Jerry Herman. His first big success was *Hello, Dolly!* in 1964 with Carol Channing, followed by *Mame* in 1966 and *Dear World* in 1969, both star vehicles for Angela Lansbury.²⁴⁴ *Mack and Mabel* in 1974 made Bernadette Peters a new leading lady, and *Jerry’s Girls* in 1985 reunited in an all-female ensemble the “larger-than-life”-women of his shows,²⁴⁵ including Chita Rivera.²⁴⁶ “Jerry hands you his soul on a silver platter. For an actor that is everything. And then it’s up to you to take care of it,”²⁴⁷ explains Rivera. Every leading lady of these musicals became a Tony Award winner or nominee and, thus, a Broadway musical star. However, Herman did not write his shows for these particular performers. Even though Lansbury thinks that “you’d have trouble bettering Bernadette Peters, quite frankly. You really would,”²⁴⁸ Bernadette Peters was not Herman’s first choice for *Mack and Mabel*.²⁴⁹ Nevertheless, she was his final choice; *Mack and Mabel* was to become a revered cult musical, and Peters received her first Tony nomination as a lead actress in a musical.²⁵⁰

²⁴³ Ethan Mordden, *Open a New Window: The Broadway Musical in the 1960s* (Basingstoke, Hampshire, England: Palgrave Macmillan and Houndsills, 2001). 115.

²⁴⁴ Mrozinski, “Jerry Herman,” accessed August 31, 2019. <http://www.jerryherman.com/jerry.htm>.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Chita Rivera cit. in Citron, *Jerry Herman – Poet of the Showtune*. 280.

²⁴⁸ Angela Lansbury cit. in Matt Weinstock, “Angela Lansbury on Mack & Mabel,” *New York City Center*, no. October 2 (2014), <https://www.nycitycenter.org/About/Blog/blog-posts-2014/angela-lansbury-on-mack--mabel/>.

²⁴⁹ Citron, *Jerry Herman – Poet of the Showtune*. 197.

²⁵⁰ Ibid. 202.

Carol Channing remembers Herman lowering the key for her, pretending he conceived it that way.²⁵¹ She stated that “that is a talent in itself. He, as Gower did, sees the particular performer he’s dealing with.”²⁵² However, Herman insisted he never tailored a score for a specific star: In a personal communication, Herman confirmed of his shows that “they were written about character and plot. The performer came last. The casting had no input to the creation. My personal warm relationship with the stars came long afterward.”²⁵³ Herman did not write a character *for* a specific performer, but he *personalized* the character for the respective performer by changing the key or the end of a melodic line if some notes might be too high or too low. Like Kander and Ebb, Herman underlines writing for the character, not a specific performer.

Nevertheless, Herman recognized when he had found his star: Gottfried recalls that the moment Herman greeted Lansbury in his doorway, “he knew that he has had his ‘Mame.’”²⁵⁴ Herman thought that “with some work, she’ll be able to sing everything I’ve written for the character.”²⁵⁵ He personalized the part of Mame for Lansbury, as he had done with Dolly, for Channing. Although Herman knew early in the creative process that Lansbury was right for this part, Lansbury was more skeptical; she was of the impression that “Jerry Herman was no Stephen Sondheim.”²⁵⁶ Although she thought that Herman’s music “was not brilliantly complex, and the lyrics were not sophisticated,”²⁵⁷ Lansbury was interested in the “unpretentiousness of his lyrics and his endearing melodies.”²⁵⁸ Obviously, Lansbury was conscious that Herman’s musical might be the star vehicle she was looking for – especially after her appearance in the failure of Sondheim’s *Anyone Can Whistle*,

²⁵¹ Channing, *Just Lucky I Guess – A Memoir of Sorts*. 183.

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Terry Marler and Jerry Herman. “Questions For my PhD Dissertation About the Broadway Belt.” terrymarler@msn.com, chrbonin@msn.com, September 4, 2019.

²⁵⁴ Gottfried, *Balancing Act – The Authorized Biography of Angela Lansbury*. 154.

²⁵⁵ Jerry Herman cit. in *ibid.* 155.

²⁵⁶ Angela Lansbury cit. in *ibid.* 154.

²⁵⁷ Ibid. 155.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

which closed after only nine performances in April 1964. Eventually, Herman's *Mame* catapulted Lansbury in 1966 into Broadway stardom.²⁵⁹ According to Stephen Citron, "His [Herman's] poetry is not the Oscar Hammerstein variety, nor does it contain the perceptiveness or intellectuality of a Sondheim."²⁶⁰ However, Herman is widely recognized as the composer and lyricist of show tunes. Songs like "Time Heals Everything" from *Mack and Mabel*, "We Need a Little Christmas" from *Mame*, "I Don't Want to Know" from *Dear World*, and "Before the Parade Passes By" from *Hello, Dolly!*, to name just a few, became well-known songs detached from the original musical's context. While these songs do not need a very strong belt voice, they need a strong interpreter using the singing voice in support of the melody and the lyrics. Herman's songs need idiosyncratic voices like Channing's, Lansbury's, Rivera's, and Peter's, and his musicals need such actresses to portray the characters.

In Herman's Broadway musicals, the Broadway Belt is more an actress with a non-classical voice than a powerful belting leading lady. His shows and their leading lady's characters were and still are star vehicles for some elite belters. For example (as mentioned), *Mack and Mabel* brought Peters her first Tony in 1974, and she starred in the 2018 revival of *Hello, Dolly!* at the beginning of her seventies – as Channing did in the revival of that show in 1996.²⁶¹ Except for *Mack and Mabel*, Herman's musicals present mainly middle-aged, strong, independent women, showing deep emotions without any outbursts or impudence. These are probably not characters that would have matched actor's personages like LuPone or Merman in their prime, even though *Hello, Dolly!* was originally offered to Merman and she was the one closing the original production on Broadway.²⁶² As Gottfried states about *Mame*, "He [Herman] might have intended to capture the archness and sophis-

²⁵⁹ Ibid. 144, 176, 181.

²⁶⁰ Citron, *Jerry Herman – Poet of the Showtune*. 281.

²⁶¹ The Broadway League, "Hello, Dolly!," accessed November 30, 2019. <https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-production/hello-dolly-507877>.

²⁶² Ethel Merman still was such a major Broadway star at the time, that probably every musical with songs centered on her big, loud belt voice fitted her, because the audience primarily came for her, not for the show.

tication that were associated with this character,²⁶³ but except for a duet between Mame and Vera called ‘Bosom Buddies,’ those qualities just were not him.”²⁶⁴ More likely than not, Herman never *wanted* to be such a composer. As he confirmed in 1984, when he received a Tony for *La Cage Aux Folles* (beating Sondheim’s *Sunday in the Park with George*), “There’s been a rumor around for a couple of years that the simple, hummable show tune was no longer welcome on Broadway. Well, it’s alive and well at the Palace.”²⁶⁵ Criticized for this phrase in his acceptance speech being a slight to Sondheim, he confirmed in 2004:

I believe that my comments upon winning the Tony for *La Cage* clearly came from my delight with the show business community’s endorsement of the simple melodic show tune which has been criticized by a few hard-nosed critics as being old fashioned ... I was simply saying ‘thank you for letting me be what I am.’²⁶⁶

With *La Cage aux Folles*, Herman confirmed his unique position as the composer-lyricist specialized in writing star vehicles. Of course, in 1983, his star is not a Broadway Belt anymore, but a drag queen.²⁶⁷ Nevertheless, for the audience, the experience of a glamorous, strong “woman” being the star of the show remains the same. When Albin sings his act-one-finale song, “I Am what I Am,” the character not only speaks from Herman’s soul²⁶⁸ but represents the enduring need for star vehicles for belting actresses – or drag queens – as confirmed by the reception of the audience of each revival.

²⁶³ Gottfried speaks about the character of the original book by Patrick Dennis, *Auntie Mame*.

²⁶⁴ Gottfried, *Balancing Act – The Authorized Biography of Angela Lansbury*. 155.

²⁶⁵ Paul Grein, “35 Years Ago, Jerry Herman and Stephen Sondheim Went Head-to-Head at the Tonys,” *Billboard*, no. May 27 (2019), <https://www.billboard.com/music/awards/jerry-herman-stephen-sondheim-tonys-8512758/>.

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ I suggest that Albin, the lead character, can be considered one of the first roles for male Broadway belters since the rock-musical era. Interestingly, the character Albin is only strong and powerful when he puts on women’s clothes, looking like a female Broadway Belt. However, this needs to be the subject of another academic work.

²⁶⁸ “Thank you for letting me be what I am” See Grein, “35 Years Ago, Jerry Herman and Stephen Sondheim Went Head-to-Head at the Tonys”.

3.2.4 Jule Styne – The Composer for Belting Stars

Historically, the first in line of these creators of 20th century Broadway musicals centering on a Broadway Belt as the star of the show is Jule Styne. He wrote the music to the 1949 Broadway hit *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, “the first star vehicle for Carol Channing.”²⁶⁹ Styne wanted Channing as his leading lady for the part of Lorelei Lee without any compromise. Channing remembered Styne answering the show’s coproducer Herman Levin: “I don’t care that her contract isn’t signed. I don’t care how little you want to pay her. If we can’t go on writing with her here, then I quit!”²⁷⁰ By saying “writing with her,” Styne confirms to have tailored this part for Channing. She was not yet a star, but Styne recognized her star qualities for this part. Later, the leading lady role of the show’s revival (slightly revised) in 1974, *Lorelei*, was again reserved for Channing and brought her another Tony nomination. Likewise, for *Funny Girl*, the 1964 Broadway musical featuring Barbra Streisand’s signature role,²⁷¹ Styne “had wanted Streisand from the first; what composer wouldn’t?”²⁷² For *Gypsy*, in 1959, the situation was reversed: It was Ethel Merman insisting on the experienced Jule Styne as a composer, instead of Sondheim who was at that time still unknown as a composer.²⁷³ Styne and the belters of his biggest Broadway musical hits had a close professional relationship. However, who *chose who* depended on who was the more important person in show business on Broadway in each era, the composer or the star.

²⁶⁹ Mary Ellen Snodgrass, *Encyclopedia of Feminist Literature* (New York: Facts On File, 2006). 335.

²⁷⁰ Jule Styne cit. in Channing, *Just Lucky I Guess – A Memoir of Sorts*. 80.

²⁷¹ Barbra Streisand is, without any doubt, one of the most important belters of the 20th century. However, although she was nominated for a Tony for *I Can Get It for You Wholesale* and *Funny Girl*, Streisand is not a Broadway Belt in the main understanding of the term. As mentioned in chapter 2.2.4, she left Broadway at the age of 25 in favor of her career as a recording artist and for roles in television and film, and did not appear in a Broadway musical on a Broadway stage ever again.

²⁷² Jule Styne cit. in Mordden, *Open a New Window: The Broadway Musical in the 1960s*.

¹²³.

²⁷³ Alyson McLamore, *Musical Theater – An Appreciation* (New York: Routledge, 2018). 307.

Jule Styne died in 1994 at the age of 91, having been able to participate in the production of two Broadway revivals of *Gypsy*, starring Angela Lansbury and Tyne Daly, respectively. According to Mordden, Lansbury “is unquestionably one of our foremost singing actresses, ...but Lansbury’s singing failed the part. Styne composed Rose for a four-wheel-drive sound that so dominates the auditorium that everyone else is the undercard.”²⁷⁴ Lansbury did not garner Mordden’s approval, but neither did Tyne Daly when Mordden states that she was “lacking a substantial music-theatre background”²⁷⁵ and “was in uncharacteristically poor voice for her disc.”²⁷⁶ Consequently, if the actresses in the part of Rose were awarded the role despite not being comparable to the original leading lady, Merman, it has to be the vehicle that made them stars. However, Styne’s songs for the part of Rose require a high-quality belt voice.²⁷⁷ According to Roxane Orgill, “even the unflappable Ethel Merman found the role of Mama Rose highly demanding. Every night after Act One Ethel sat in her dressing room with her head in her hands, unable to speak.”²⁷⁸ Merman called *Gypsy*’s songs “dramatic songs with dimension.”²⁷⁹ Nevertheless, she preferred to use her “trademark bulldozer belt instead of finding the emotional nuances of the character,”²⁸⁰ as Mark Robinson states. Merman was a singer, not an actress, but Rose is a “complicated, slightly off-balance character.”²⁸¹ The combination of high-quality belting and dramatic acting is “considered by many to be the crowning achievement of an actress’ musical theatre career, and certainly the choicest of roles for ‘women of a certain age,’”²⁸² continues

²⁷⁴ Mordden, *Anything Goes – A History of American Musical Theatre*. 319.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ Ibid. Mordden compares the recordings of Lansbury and Daly, not their live performances. Nevertheless, if the recording under confined, studio recording conditions does not find his approval, there is little chance he would judge differently on their singing on a Broadway stage.

²⁷⁷ Further details will be explained in my case study of *Gypsy* in chapter four.

²⁷⁸ Roxane Orgill, *Shout, Sister, Shout! Ten Girl Singers Who Shaped a Century* (New York: Margaret K. McElderry Books, 2001). 48.

²⁷⁹ Ibid. 47.

²⁸⁰ Mark Robinson, “Ethel and Angela and Patti, Oh My! Who is the Fiercest Rose of All?”, *Playbill*, no. May 23 (2015), <http://www.playbill.com/article/ethel-and-angela-and-patti-oh-my-who-is-the-fiercest-rose-of-all-com-349615>.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

²⁸² Ibid.

Robinson. Thus Rose is not a part to *begin* a career with, as might be Roxie, Velma, Mable, or Lorelei. The part of Rose *confirms* a Broadway Belt as a star, and that is probably one of the reasons why every ten-to-fifteen years, a Broadway revival of *Gypsy* needs to be put on stage: Each revival *confirms* an actual elite Broadway Belt and, thus, her impact on Broadway musical theatre. Since *Gypsy*'s premiere in 1959, the part of Rose has allowed "a wide-range of complex performances and distinct interpretations."²⁸³ Hence, *Gypsy* – its story, songs, and dramatic dimension – is *timeless*, which makes it a star vehicle par excellence. Although Styne's music likely carries the most responsibility for *Gypsy* becoming a star vehicle, calling as it does for an elite belt voice, it is (besides playwright Arthur Laurents), also necessary to mention Stephen Sondheim, the lyricist of *Gypsy*. His lyrics have been praised as addressing the topic by way of metaphor,²⁸⁴ which offers the performer large possibilities for interpretation. However, in 1959, Broadway musical theatre was not yet ready for Sondheim's composing style, described as a mixture between Tin Pan Alley and contemporary classical music.²⁸⁵ According to Freedman, Styne once said of Sondheim, "If he's the hope of musical theater, he's got to write melody."²⁸⁶ Without Merman's instinct to choose Styne as the composer, *Gypsy* possibly would not have been another star vehicle for Merman, nor a star vehicle for all the Broadway belters succeeding Merman as "Rose." Thus Merman paved the way for her successors – but not only that. Although aesthetics in Broadway musical theatre changed tremendously from the end of the 1950s on, Merman kept alive the *necessity* of a Broadway Belt in musical theatre, and Styne proved how essential are melodic tunes for an established Broadway Belt.

Like Herman, Styne knew how to center strong women in his musicals and served them their stardom on a silver plate. Additionally, as early as in 1967, Styne opened doors for African-American belters: Styne's *Hallelujah, Baby!* made Leslie Uggams a star and, in 1968, the

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Samuel G. Freedman, "The Words and Music of Stephen Sondheim," *The New York Times*, no. April 1 (1984): <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/04/01/magazine/the-words-and-music-of-stephen-sondheim.html>.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

²⁸⁶ Jule Styne cit. in ibid.

year Martin Luther King was shot, Uggams became the first African-American belter,²⁸⁷ winning a Tony Award for Best Performance by an Actress in a Leading Role in a Musical.²⁸⁸

Herman and Styne wrote not only Broadway musical history but they also took part in crucial changes in the American social order through the cultural impact of their “simple, melodic show tunes.”²⁸⁹ Each time a Broadway Belt gives a star performance of a lifetime as a leading lady in a Broadway musical, she also underlines her impact on social order, gender, and, in respective Broadway musicals, ethnic inclusion. She confirms not only belting as an outstanding vocal expression in Broadway musical theatre, but also the necessity for star vehicles with melodic tunes despite changing aesthetics in Broadway musical theatre and, thus, in American culture.

3.2.5 Stephen Sondheim – Concept Musical versus Megamusicals

When book musicals began to lose steam in the 1960s, a new term found its place in theatrical scholarship, the *concept musical*. In 1968, *New York Times* critic Martin Gottfried used the term in his review of Kander and Ebb's *Zorba*, saying “Conception is the big word here – it is what is coming to replace the idea of a ‘book.’”²⁹⁰ However, Harold Prince names Kurt Weill's *Love Life* (1948) and Rodgers & Hammerstein's *Allegro* (1947) as the first concept musicals.²⁹¹ Although the term's definition is still vague, it became quickly a widespread term for this new form of Broadway musical theatre. William A. Everett defines it loosely “as a show in which linear storytelling becomes less important

²⁸⁷ The first woman of color to win the Tony Award for Best Featured Actress in a Musical was Juanita Hall for her 1950 performance in Rodgers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific*. In 1962, Diahann Carroll became the first African-American female performer to win the Tony in a *leading* role, but she was a classically-trained singer, not a belter.

²⁸⁸ Tony Award® Productions, “Tony Award Winners”.

²⁸⁹ Grein, “35 Years Ago, Jerry Herman and Stephen Sondheim Went Head-to-Head at the Tonys”.

²⁹⁰ Martin Gottfried cit. in Steve Swayne, *How Sondheim Found His Sound* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2007). Appendix.

²⁹¹ Harold Prince cit. in ibid. 258.

than the show's overall message, which involves a psychological perception or common life event.”²⁹² In 1975, the term appeared in the billing of *A Chorus Line* as “conceived, choreographed and directed by Michael Bennett.”²⁹³ However, independently of who might have used the phrase “concept musical” first, it was Sondheim’s musical *Company* (1970) that became as such “a landmark in the development of American Musical theatre.”²⁹⁴ As Gottfried emphasized in his review, “[*Company*] isn’t a story musical but an alternative to the ‘book show,’ which any sophisticated (and there aren’t many) musical theatre person knows is silly, passé and doomed.”²⁹⁵ Sondheim states:

Up until *Company*, I thought that musicals had to have very strong plots. One of the things that fascinated me about the challenge of the show was to see if a musical could be done without one ... The problem was to find the form for it.²⁹⁶

According to Swayne, Sondheim concentrates on “the idea of ‘concept’” in the sense of “wanting to reduce things to simplicities.”²⁹⁷ *Simplicity* is not a term easily connected to a larger-than-life Broadway Belt. Thus a Sondheim musical might not be a star vehicle for a Broadway Belt and the influence of his kind of concept shows can even be responsible for the fading importance of the Broadway Belt in Broadway musical theatre since the 1970s. However, even though a Sondheim musical, compared to typical star vehicles, might not bring stardom to a Broadway Belt, she can find creative achievement appearing in a leading role in one. Sondheim’s musicals rarely are filled with melodic songs to remember, but – comparable to megamusicals – they usually have at least *one song* for a Broadway Belt to capture the audience’s attention and

²⁹² William A. Everett, *Historical Dictionary of the Broadway Musical* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016). 4.

²⁹³ Christine Margaret Young, “Attention Must Be Paid; cried the Balladeer: The Concept Musical Defined” (Thesis (M.A.), University of Kentucky, 2008). 9.

²⁹⁴ Stempel, *Showtime – A History of the Broadway Musical Theater*. 532.

²⁹⁵ Martin Gottfried cit. in Swayne, *How Sondheim Found His Sound*. Appendix.

²⁹⁶ Steven Sondheim cit. in Stempel, *Showtime – A History of the Broadway Musical Theater*. 532.

²⁹⁷ Swayne, *How Sondheim Found His Sound*. 259.

this song can sometimes be a tour de force that matches if not overshadows the show in which they appear. *Company*'s "The Ladies Who Lunch" confirmed Elaine Stritch's position as an elite Broadway Belt when she played Joanne as part of the original Broadway cast in 1970 and the revival in 1993. LuPone played the part in London's 2018 West End re-gendered revival, winning the Laurence Olivier Award for Best Actress in a Supporting Role in a Musical and – despite her announcement to slow down – is part of the cast in the 2021 Broadway revival.²⁹⁸

Lansbury's first appearance in a Sondheim musical was in 1964, in *Anyone Can Whistle*, one of Sondheim's biggest failures (as mentioned), but she triumphed in *Gypsy*²⁹⁹ in 1974 and *Sweeney Todd* in 1979.³⁰⁰ Bernadette Peters was a 1984 Tony nominee for her role as Dot in Sondheim's *Sunday in the Park with George*, won the 1988 Drama Desk Award as Outstanding Actress in a Musical for her role as The Witch in Sondheim's *Into the Woods*, and was a 2003 Tony nominee for *Gypsy*.³⁰¹ Moreover, according to Alex Witchel of *The New York Times*, Peters "is considered by many to be the premier interpreter of his work."³⁰² All these Broadway belters were celebrated in one or more Sondheim musicals, but they already had reached stardom in earlier musicals before. "If you get really good performance, they can make you shine,"³⁰³ says Sondheim. Thus an elite Broadway Belt can uplift the composer's work of a concept piece, but, for herself, this is just testimony to her talent and stardom.

Nevertheless, Sondheim states that "Most of my shows were money failures. And most of my reviews have been negative."³⁰⁴ Certainly, besides *Anyone Can Whistle* with 12 performances, *Merrily We Roll*

²⁹⁸ Michael Paulson, "'Company' Returning to Broadway, With a Woman at its Center," *The New York Times*, no. August 30 (2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/30/theater/broadway-company-sondheim-elliott-katrina-lenk-patti-lupone.html>.

²⁹⁹ Just as a reminder: Sondheim was the lyricist of *Gypsy*, not the composer.

³⁰⁰ General information about Broadway musicals and their cast are available on www.ibdb.com and/ or www.tonyawards.com.

³⁰¹ Ibid.

³⁰² Witchel, "Theater; A True Star, Looking For Places to Shine".

³⁰³ Stephen Sondheim cit. in Bryer and Davison, *The Art of the American Musical – Conversations with the Creators*. 204.

³⁰⁴ Stephen Sondheim cit. in Foster Hirsch, *Harold Prince and the American Musical Theater* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). 71–72.

Along closed after 16, *Assassins* (2004) after 101, *The Frogs* (2004) after 92, and *Pacific Overtures* (2004) after 69 performances.³⁰⁵ In contrast, and perhaps paradoxically, many Broadway musical performers are excited to do “finally a Sondheim musical,”³⁰⁶ as LuPone says.

So, if the musical is not a star vehicle and the risk of appearing in a Broadway musical *failure* is elevated, the only reason for a Broadway Belt to appear in a Sondheim musical could be an artistic interest. “He’s a taskmaster when it comes to pitch and what is considered Broadway singing – no bending of the note, no swooping,” said LuPone in an interview with *The Los Angeles Times*.³⁰⁷ “It takes a lot of concentration and discipline to sing him as written.”³⁰⁸ Sondheim’s work asks for the high achievement of creative skills, especially vocally. As LuPone remembers:

I was scared to death when I made my entrance. ... You’re playing with one of the three best orchestras in the world. And it’s Stephen Sondheim. You can’t mess up. It has to be the best you’ve got. It was a benchmark in my career. The two creators that have shaped my abilities are David Mamet and Stephen Sondheim. They raise the bar for me. I have to work hard and comprehend much to be good.³⁰⁹

Raising the bar was certainly one of the most crucial motivations for LuPone to do a Sondheim musical. Even though she had reached stardom in Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *Evita*, LuPone would have preferred to accept Ira Weitzman’s offer to audition for the part of Fosca in Sondheim’s musical *Passion* instead of being stuck in London’s production

³⁰⁵ The Broadway League, “Stephen Sondheim,” accessed March 26, 2020. <https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-cast-staff/stephen-sondheim-12430>.

³⁰⁶ LuPone and Diehl, *Patti LuPone – A Memoir*. 215

³⁰⁷ Patti LuPone cit. in Broadway.com, “What Made Patti LuPone Want To Smack Sondheim? The Broadway-Bound Diva Confesses,” accessed September 29, <https://www.broadway.com/buzz/157899/what-made-patti-lupone-want-to-smack-sondheim-the-broadway-bound-diva-confesses/>.

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

³⁰⁹ Patti LuPone cit. in Shapiro, *Nothing Like A Dame – Conversations with the Great Women of Musical Theater*. Pos. 3750–3762.

of Webber's *Sunset Boulevard* in 1993, as she has affirmed.³¹⁰ Therefore, her first Sondheim experience in a leading role on a Broadway stage became the role of Mrs. Lovett in *Sweeney Todd*'s Broadway revival during the 2005–2006 theatre season, at age 56.³¹¹ However, as early as 1985, LuPone had auditioned for Peters's replacement in *Sunday in the Park with George*.³¹² While Peters is considered to be "Sondheim's long-term muse,"³¹³ LuPone does not see herself as Sondheim's choice, as she points out in a 2012 interview: "I don't know what Steve thinks of me. I really don't. I don't think I'm one of his favorites. I would have done something much sooner if I had been."³¹⁴

The professional relationship between Sondheim and his stars has a different character to these of Kander and Ebb, Herman, and Styne with theirs. "He's a tough nut to crack," LuPone remembers, "but he's been a great teacher. He's pointed out flaws of mine that were necessary to correct that I wasn't aware of."³¹⁵ Thus, as a teacher, Sondheim guides his star to achievement which, vice-versa, brings success to the creator's work. It's a mutual achievement of creativity.

Lansbury's memories about her first experience of the 34-year-old Sondheim in 1964 are comparable to LuPone's. "Even at that early age, I was very awed by him. I always thought, and do this to this day, that he's been a teacher of how to sing songs. ... It's all about lyrics, it's all about enunciation, it's all about being understood,"³¹⁶ states Lansbury. Since Lansbury appeared also in three Jerry Herman musicals, she compares both composers:

³¹⁰ LuPone and Diehl, *Patti LuPone – A Memoir*. 215.

³¹¹ The Broadway League, "Patti LuPone," accessed September 10, 2019. <https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-cast-staff/patti-lupone-50271>.

³¹² Shapiro, *Nothing Like A Dame – Conversations with the Great Women of Musical Theater*. Pos. 3740–3750.

³¹³ Hadley Freeman, "Follies – Review," *The Guardian*, no. September 15 (2011), <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2011/sep/15/follies-review>.

³¹⁴ Patti LuPone cit. in Shapiro, *Nothing Like A Dame – Conversations with the Great Women of Musical Theater*. Pos. 3750.

³¹⁵ Ibid. Pos. 3762.

³¹⁶ Angela Lansbury cit. in ibid. Pos. 1808.

Jerry writes about people and relationships, happiness, and joy. Steve writes about life and also about very, very accurate inner feelings which are not immediately evident in the lyric. They are far more intellectualized than Jerry Herman's. But Jerry Herman is capable of writing an incredibly astute and carefully crafted lyrics. ... And he also writes magnificent melodies.³¹⁷

While Herman's melodic show tunes made Lansbury a star through *Mame* in 1966 and *Dear World* in 1969, and the revival of Styne's *Gypsy* in 1974 brought her a third Tony, it was *Sweeney Todd* (1979) that brought her recognition as an elite Broadway musical actress: According to Gottfried, "Just as she had approached the star quality of Mame Denis as character acting, so she now readied to portray, as an actor, the batty energy and the mindless, almost good-natured evildoing of Nellie Lovett."³¹⁸ Gottfried calls Sondheim "the very picture of eccentric genius,"³¹⁹ and Lansbury emphasizes, "I was thrilled when people told me, 'That's the best thing you ever did'."³²⁰ Again, *Sweeney Todd* was a mutual achievement between Sondheim and a Broadway Belt.

According to Hirsch, Sondheim and his collaborator, Harold Prince, are "stage-struck showmen weaned on a romance of the Broadway big time that they have never outgrown and that helps to explain their drive for continued achievement, and of critical as well as popular acceptance."³²¹ Their *drive for achievement* also brought achievement for other Broadway belters, such as Elaine Stritch who – as mentioned before – originated the part of "Joanne" in *Company*. Like Lansbury, Stritch recognizes that Sondheim's achievement is exclusively based on his prowess as a craftsman of musical theatre, admitting being terrified of "the enormity of his talent and how he handles that talent."³²² She

³¹⁷ Ibid. Pos. 1887.

³¹⁸ Gottfried, *Balancing Act – The Authorized Biography of Angela Lansbury*. 238.

³¹⁹ Ibid. 134–135.

³²⁰ Angela Lansbury cit. in ibid. 245.

³²¹ Hirsch, *Harold Prince and the American Musical Theater*. 71.

³²² Elaine Stritch cit. in Broadwayworld.com, "Sondheim Review presents – Elaine Stritch Holds Forth About Stephen Sondheim ... and More," Broadway World, accessed June 6, 2019. <https://www.broadwayworld.com/article/THE-SONDHEIM-REVIEW-Presents-Elaine-Stritch-holds-forth-about-Stephen-Sondheim-and-more-20140918>.

argues that “Talent is a very hard thing to explain,” and concludes, “It’s a complicated mess, this talent thing. But when you see it, you know it. That’s how it is with Steve. People listen to his songs, and they know they’re hearing real, honest-to-God talent.”³²³ Stritch’s achievement in Sondheim musicals is based on serious work, which can even put one in danger of “getting sick because you are so intent about accomplishment.”³²⁴ Her hard work on Sondheim’s song “The Ladies Who Lunch,”³²⁵ *Company*’s eleven o’clock number, paid off and is “considered one of the all-time greatest interpretations of any musical theater song.”³²⁶ Her hard work increases the value of Sondheim’s talent.

Sondheim’s Pulitzer-Prize-for-Drama-winning musical *Sunday in the Park with George* brought Bernadette Peters her second Tony nomination.³²⁷ After hearing only one song and reading thirty pages of the first act, she agreed to play Dot.³²⁸ Sondheim had not even written the music for the second act when rehearsals began.³²⁹ “I really don’t want to write the score until the show is cast and in rehearsal. Then I wouldn’t make any mistakes. Silly as it sounds, it’s true because by then you know the qualities of the people you’re writing for,”³³⁰ states Sondheim. He writes for specific artists. Contrary to other creatives, he crafts characters, taking into account the respective performers and their creative skills. Since he usually writes the music *and* the lyrics for his musicals, acting and singing merge into one true expression of his work. “Steve and James [Lapine] were writing as we were doing it,” confirms Peters.

³²³ Ibid.

³²⁴ Elaine Stritch cit. in Shapiro, *Nothing Like A Dame – Conversations with the Great Women of Musical Theater*. Pos. 340.

³²⁵ The video about her struggling with this number during the rehearsal process of the Broadway cast recording is an impressive demonstration of Stritch’s determination. See Elaine Stritch Sings ‘Here’s To The Ladies Who Lunch’, posted by “withlotsabutta,” March 5, 2009. (YouTube: Google LLC), 7:10, <https://youtu.be/Gf52APstloA>.

³²⁶ Shapiro, *Nothing Like A Dame – Conversations with the Great Women of Musical Theater*. Pos. 115.

³²⁷ See <https://www.tonyawards.com>

³²⁸ Matt Weinstock, “How Sondheim and Lapine Made a Masterpiece with ‘Sunday in the Park with George,’” *Playbill*, no. October 25 (2016), <http://www.playbill.com/article/how-sondheim-and-lapine-made-a-masterpiece-with-sunday-in-the-park-with-george>.

³²⁹ Ibid.

³³⁰ Stephen Sondheim cit. in ibid.

“Every day we’d wait to see if a song would appear.”³³¹ With *Sunday* in 1984, the lifelong professional relationship between Sondheim, the creator, and Peters, the star, began: Peters appeared on Broadway in 1987 in *Into the Woods*, in *Gypsy* in 2003, *A Little Night Music* in 2009, and *Follies* in 2012, not to mention her concert series and recordings concentrating on Sondheim’s work.³³² As Peters explains, “A lot of his songs that I love are the ones that are inspiring. They help you in life.”³³³ Peters explains preparing for a Sondheim show with similar words to Lansbury’s that “You’re in awe, you know, so it’s hard to focus.”³³⁴ Peters further explains:

His songs make so much sense. They have such depth. There are layers and layers to his songs. You sing a song and the next time you sing it it can mean something else total. ... I understand that. He writes the music and the lyrics very specifically, saying what he wants to say by making it a quarter note or a half note. ... He wants it done a certain way. I understand that because he’s writing that way for a reason.³³⁵

According to Nathan Hurwitz, “Each Sondheim work, it seems, is a unique and completely individual work unto itself. The connection between his scores is the brilliance with which the composer/lyricist connects character and material to the text.”³³⁶ Nevertheless, Sondheim emphasizes that he approaches his work as an actor: “I inhabit the character the way I think an actor does. Often by the time we’re through, I know the script better than the author [of the book the musical is based on] does, because, like an actor, I examine every line and every

³³¹ Bernadette Peters cit. in ibid.

³³² The Broadway League, “Bernadette Peters,” The Broadway League, accessed March 20, 2020. <https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-cast-staff/bernadette-peters-68530>.

³³³ Bernadette Peters cit. in Soloski, “Bernadette Peters: ‘Every Role I’ve played, I’ve thought – That’s Me!’”

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ Bernadette Peters, interview by Robert Sokol, 1998. <http://www.sondheim.com/interview/sbswp.html>.

³³⁶ Hurwitz, *Songwriters of the American Musical Theatre – A Style Guide for Singers*. 202.

word.”³³⁷ Thus Sondheim does not write for Peters, the star; he writes for the *actress*. The “layers” Peters speaks about are facets of the role, its complexity, giving future actresses – or even herself, as she says – the possibility to concentrate on different aspects of the role and character. This complexity demands a great deal of each performer, and at the same time, the abilities of the chosen performer certainly have an inspirational effect on Sondheim: Knowing the “qualities of the people you are writing for,”³³⁸ as Sondheim puts it, he can create highly demanding parts for the elite Broadway Belt. In contrast to Herman and Styne, Sondheim never did write for an actor’s personage, but for the actress and her skills: Writing the score when the show is already in rehearsal, his creation of a musical’s character and the respective performer’s *interpretation* through acting and singing merge together, as opposed to the character fusing with the Broadway star.

Interestingly, the Broadway Belt does even not need a full leading-lady part in a Sondheim musical for her to be successful. According to David Walsh, “Sondheim’s effect on the musical has been to create a musical for connoisseurs.”³³⁹ Thus creating a strong role in a crucial artistic work “for connoisseurs,” Sondheim gives the possibility to a Broadway Belt to become recognized by connoisseurs. Therefore, even in short appearances on stage, sometimes with only one song (not even one of the hummable variety), the Broadway Belt can experience creative fulfillment through Sondheim’s work. However, to reach *stardom* and, notably, recognition by the audience as a Broadway Belt, appearing in the work of other composers is necessary *before* appearing in a Sondheim musical. This prerequisite cannot be ignored. For example (as mentioned), Peters was nominated for Herman’s *Mack and Mabel* ten years before playing *Sunday in the Park with George* and won her first Tony for her leading part in *Song and Dance* before portraying The Witch in *Into the Woods*. Similarly, it was *Evita* that brought LuPone

³³⁷ Bryer and Davison, *The Art of the American Musical – Conversations with the Creators*. 197.

³³⁸ Stephen Sondheim cit. in Weinstock, “How Sondheim and Lapine Made a Masterpiece with ‘Sunday in the Park with George’”.

³³⁹ David Walsh and Len Platt, *Musical Theater and American Culture* (London: Praeger Publishers, 2003). 146.

stardom and her first Tony. *Song and Dance* and *Evita* are both musicals by Webber, whose *commercial* success is usually considered as a sharp contrast to Sondheim's *creative* achievement.³⁴⁰ Nevertheless, what the musicals of Lloyd Webber and Sondheim have in common is that their shows primarily feature someone with star *quality*, but not necessarily a star. Although it is possible to become a Broadway star in a Webber musical – for example, Betty Buckley as “Grizabella” in *Cats* or the achievement of Peters and LuPone in other Webber musicals (as mentioned above) – this is not the case for a Sondheim musical. What is missing in his shows, arguably, are hummable melodic tunes that the Broadway musicals of Kander, Herman, and Styne, and even Webber's megamusicals, provide. A Sondheim musical does not offer a Broadway Belt much opportunity to be invited onto television shows or radio programs, even with a signature song, because his songs are complex and tightly integrated into the story and usually do not stand alone well.³⁴¹ The difficulty of building a Broadway musical career on a role in a Sondheim musical is shown by the example of Joanna Gleason, who, in 1988, won a Tony as best actress for *Into the Woods*. While other factors may have been in play, the fact remains that her following Broadway appearances are limited to *Nick & Nora* in 1991, which closed after nine performances, and *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* in 2005. Even though the latter brought her a Tony nomination, Gleason never again appeared in a Broadway show.³⁴²

Even winning Tony Awards cannot veil the fact that the Broadway Belt did not win back yet her lost legacy in Broadway musical theatre. Although the creation of a Broadway musical is considered to have evolved through the idea of the concept musical, modern Broadway musicals are usually missing strong female characters created for a Broadway Belt as the leading lady. This is not exclusively due to con-

³⁴⁰ See Stephen Citron, *Sondheim and Lloyd-Webber – The New Musical* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). Stephen Citron, especially, compares both composers directly in this regard.

³⁴¹ “Being Alive” from *Company* and “Not While I’m Around” from *Sweeney Todd* might be exceptions, especially the renditions of Barbra Streisand on her Broadway Album from 1985.

³⁴² The Broadway League, “Joanna Gleason,” accessed March 26, 2020. <https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-cast-staff/joanna-gleason-42342>.

cept musicals, remembering that during the 1970s and up to the 1990s, the concept musical as a new subgenre of Broadway musical theatre paralleled the birth of the megamusical. Acknowledged as a plotless revue,³⁴³ Lloyd Webber's megamusical *Cats* (1982) is, as such, comparable to Sondheim's *Company* from 1970. Both musicals offer a signature song for a Broadway Belt, but the respective roles are not comparable to Roxie, Mame, or Rose. The so-called subgenre of megamusicals, *jukebox musicals*, like *Tina Turner – The Musical* or *The Cher Show*, might be seen as a contradiction to my argument, but these biographical shows present the life of famous and celebrated leading ladies, and the respective Broadway Belt has to sound, act and move like the original star. Portraying, nearly copying, Tina Turner or Cher does not allow the respective Broadway Belt to create a legacy. Each will need to *originate* a female portrayal with her *own* belt voice, acting and moving talent to build a lifelong career as an elite Broadway Belt.

Nevertheless, even though the Broadway Belt is generally no longer the sole star of the show – not since Broadway musical's aesthetics have changed – these changes have not affected the significant impact a Broadway Belt still has on Broadway musical theatre. The belter lost neither her title as *the* Broadway Belt nor the unbroken admiration of the audience and the critics: If there exists a belt song in a musical, even in a concept musical or megamusical, it is usually *that* song and the Broadway Belt singing it that reaches acknowledgment beyond the show itself. Broadway shows like *Cats* and *Wicked* confirm that one song belted out by an exceptional belter can be enough for both song and singer to reach a certain cult status. However, this is not always the case, as *The Producers*, *Les Misérables* or *Spamalot* demonstrate. Consequently, the star vehicle for a Broadway Belt generally is not the Broadway musical itself anymore, but *the most significant belt song* of the show. The dilemma for the Broadway Belt is that it is much more difficult to create a legacy through the interpretation of just one song

³⁴³ As Kyle Smith writes: "Based on 'Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats,' a collection of silly poems T.S. Eliot wrote for his godchildren when his mind was on a coffee break, the musical is a virtually plotless embrace of all things feline." See Kyle Smith, "Retract Your Claws, Haters – 'Cats' is Terrific," *The New York Post*, no. August 2 (2016), <https://nypost.com/2016/08/02/retract-your-claws-haters-cats-is-terrific/>.

than by portraying a lead character. Serendipitously, Broadway musical *revivals* keep such characters alive: As this chapter is being written, Broadway musical theatre tickets are simultaneously available and often sold out for *Chicago*, *Cabaret*, *West Side Story*, *Oklahoma!*, and *Fiddler on the Roof*.³⁴⁴ Without revivals of star vehicles, the Broadway Belt would, at best, be just another cast member of the show and, at worst, become a relic.

Even though the one significant song in a concept musical or megamusical is better than nothing, what is missing in such shows, and always will be, is a theatre-evening-filling role demonstrating *human accomplishment*. Whether it is a car race, any sport competition, a soccer game, or a Broadway musical, the audience comes to see *big, exceptional, extraordinary* human accomplishment. As Robert M. Boland states:

In the musical, entertainment is an important factor, but what is entertainment? It is *good* singing, dancing, acting, and sets, of course; but there is more to it than that. When we hear a beautiful singing voice or watch a skillful dancer, the human accomplishment makes the whole human race greater than the individuals might be.³⁴⁵

Certainly, the successful interpretation of each belt song is an accomplishment, but it is not comparable to the part of a leading lady. Additionally, concept musicals generally are limited in their number of performances because, as “musicals for connoisseurs,” they are commercially much less successful than megamusicals.

Due to many national and international productions and tours of megamusicals, there are today more talented belters on stages all over the world than ever before. The performer who originated a part is easily replaceable and becomes someone remembered from the past – or even forgotten, as far as the next belter sings the song with comparably high vocal quality. The number of Broadway musical performers who appeared on a Broadway stage as Elphaba, Eponine, Grizabella, and

³⁴⁴ For actual information see <https://www.todaytix.com>.

³⁴⁵ Robert Boland and Paul Argentini, *Musicals! Directing School and Community Theatre* (Oxford: Scarecrow Press Inc., 1997). 7.

others, is nearly countless; the number of Roses, Dollys, Sally Bowleses, and others is not. Twenty-one years after its last Broadway revival and 54 years after its premiere in 1964, the fourth Broadway revival of *Hello, Dolly!* played from April 2017 to August 2018. As Dolly, only two names are listed: Bette Midler and Bernadette Peters, both in their seventies.³⁴⁶ From its premiere in 1964 until August 2018, a total of nine different first-cast and replacement Dollys are listed to have played in 55 previews and 3699 performances on Broadway. The still-running show *Wicked* is listed with the opening-night cast, the current cast, and replacements. After 25 previews, *Wicked* counts 6836 performances as of March 15, 2020, and 23 Elphabas as replacements since its premiere in 2003.³⁴⁷ Although the part of Elphaba needs a high-profile belt voice, especially for the song “Defying Gravity,” none of these Elphabas will have the chance to receive the recognition they probably should get for this difficult part. Idina Menzel won a Tony originating Elphaba in 2003, but she is the only one. Meanwhile, Bette Midler won the Tony of Best Performance by an Actress in a Leading Role in a Musical for the *Hello, Dolly!* revival in 2017, following Channing winning a Tony for its premiere in 1964. For *Gypsy*, there are four Tony winners and one nominee since 1959.³⁴⁸ In a long-running megamusical, there is only one winner. Megamusicals do not allow the building of a legacy, but they give countless performers jobs over many years. The extremely long run of such shows represents an entertainment industry of its own; nevertheless, these shows are part of Broadway musical theatre.

For further research, it would be interesting to compare the longtime impact of star vehicles, concept musicals, and megamusicals on Broadway musical theatre, especially concerning the Broadway Belt. Today, over fifty years since their premiere, musicals like *Gypsy* and *Hello, Dolly!* are still acclaimed and resurrected every five to fifteen years through a new revival centering on an elite Broadway Belt. Whether the 2017 *Hello*

³⁴⁶ Since these leading ladies are not performing eight shows a week, Donna Murphy is listed for Tuesday evening performances with Linda Mugleston, Jessica Sheridan and Carmen Ruby Floyd as understudies. See The Broadway League, “Hello, Dolly!”

³⁴⁷ “*Wicked*,” accessed November 30, 2019. <https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-production/wicked-13485>.

³⁴⁸ Tony Award * Productions, “Tony Award Winners.”

Dolly! revival could have been such a huge success without Midler and Peters, and whether any star vehicle can survive without an elite Broadway Belt as its leading lady, remain unknown. Consequently, when Mark Shenton writes that “unless producers keep faith with new shows and keep expanding the repertoire, there’ll be no old shows to revive in the future,”³⁴⁹ I would argue for my subject even further that, without new star vehicles with a leading lady part, Broadway musical theatre will run out of Broadway stars. Only lifelong careers of elite Broadway belters can carry on cementing the legacy of the Broadway Belt, and that will be impossible without new star vehicles. As Shenton writes:

New shows, of course, are much higher risk, in the sense that there's no guarantee they'll actually work – whereas you know with a beloved revival that the show itself works. But the rewards of a new show are also greater: revivals typically run out of audiences after two or three years.³⁵⁰

Nevertheless, as *Hello Dolly!* and each revival of *Gypsy* proves, revivals of star vehicles, and even revivals of highly acclaimed concept musicals,³⁵¹ offer to an elite Broadway Belt the possibility to shine like the original performer. In contrast, since megamusicals run for many years with many different belters, their revivals and, consequently, the respective belters, find significantly less interest than the original. According to Shenton,

Recent history bears this out: the original Broadway transfer of *Miss Saigon* ran for a decade at the Broadway Theatre; when it was revived there in 2017, it ran for less than two years. Ditto *Cats*, which during its original run at the Winter Garden overtook *A Chorus Line* to become the

³⁴⁹ Mark Shenton, “Are We Running Out of Golden Age Musicals to Revive?,” *London Theatre.co.uk*, no. May 1 (2019), <https://www.londontheatre.co.uk/theatre-news/west-end-features/are-we-running-out-of-golden-age-musicals-to-revive>.

³⁵⁰ Ibid. except for *Chicago*, as mentioned before.

³⁵¹ For example, Sondheim’s *A Little Night Music* won eleven Tonys in 1973 and its revival in 2010 brought Catherine Zeta-Jones a Tony for Best Performance by an Actress in a Leading Role in a Musical.

longest-running musical in Broadway history until then, finally closing in 2000; but a 2016 Broadway revival, by comparison, chalked up only 17 months.³⁵²

Certainly, the numbers are bigger for a megamusical revival than for a star vehicle.³⁵³ However, while, for example, the original 1959 production of *Gypsy* ran for 702 performances, the 1989 revival ran for nearly as many, with 581.³⁵⁴ In contrast, *Cats*, premiering in 1982, ran for 7485 performances, while its revival in 2016 closed after 593.³⁵⁵ Thus *Gypsy*'s revival attracted about 82% of the original number of spectators, while *Cats* covered only about 8%. From a commercial point of view, according to *Forbes Magazine*, the 2017 revival of another star vehicle, *Hello, Dolly!*, grossed \$128.19 million on an investment of \$15.9 million in its 16-month run,³⁵⁶ while the 2016 revival of *Cats* has cost \$11 million, and had recovered only \$759,699 after nearly a one-year running time.³⁵⁷ Thus it is not only the audience's interest that confirms the need for star vehicles for Broadway belters; even the commercial interest can be greater.

"The production philosophy of 'bigger is better' had reached an end," claims Hurwitz. "By 1993, it had run its course."³⁵⁸ Regarding musicals like *The Lion King* (1997), *Wicked* (2003) and *Hamilton* (2015), Hurwitz's timeline for megamusicals on Broadway ending in 1993 certainly

352 Shenton, "Are We Running Out of Golden Age Musicals to Revive?"

353 Again, except for *Chicago*: The original production ran just over two years, with 936 performances, while the 1996 revival is the longest-running American musical revival in Broadway history, with 9692 performances as of March 15, 2020. See The Broadway League, "Chicago".

354 "Gypsy – A Musical Fable," accessed January 13, 2020. <https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-show/gypsy-4135>.

355 "Cats," accessed January 24, 2020. <https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-production/cats-504579>.

356 Lee Seymour, "Broadway's 'Hello, Dolly!' Closes With Broken Records, Trickling Profits," *Forbes*, no. August 27 (2018), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/leeseymour/2018/08/27/hello-dolly-closes-with-broken-records-trickling-roi/#501bdf412dd0>. I have chosen the example of *Hello, Dolly!* because, as of mid-2020, *Gypsy* has not been revived since 2008.

357 Michael Paulson, "Cats' Revival to Close at Year's End," *The New York Times*, no. June 21 (2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/21/theater/cats-revival-to-close-at-years-end.html>.

358 Nathan Hurwitz, *A History of the American Musical Theatre – No Business Like it* (London: Routledge, 2014). 211.

was premature. However, as seen in the numbers presented above, for the coming decades of the 21st century, a Broadway musical *being* the star instead of *presenting* a star could be a bad choice for future productions. For now, musicals like *The Lion King* and *Wicked* still attract an audience big enough to keep on running. However, in a time when musical movies like *The Lion King* and *Cats* appear in cinemas in *virtual reality*, paying high-price tickets to see animal puppets played by highly qualified, but more-or-less unknown performers might begin to lose audience interest – and a revival after a few years' break could become another commercial disaster for its potential investors, as *Cats* was. On the contrary, as long as there exists an elite Broadway Belt able to carry a star vehicle, the audience will keep on running to buy tickets for sold-out shows. As Shenton says:

Another producing model for revivals is to simply turn them into prestige, star-driven events that aren't meant to run forever. Producer Scott Rudin mastered this approach with *Hello, Dolly!*, which he revived at the Shubert Theatre in 2017 with a cast led by Bette Midler, who was succeeded by Bernadette Peters; it is now on the touring road with Betty Buckley. Next up: he's bringing *The Music Man* back to Broadway next year, with Hugh Jackman in the title role.³⁵⁹

Thus, if it is of commercial interest *and* in the interest of the audience to turn a revival into a “prestige, star-driven event,”³⁶⁰ the only obvious conclusion to be drawn is that new Broadway musicals need to be star vehicles again. It is the live singing, *human accomplishment* that attracts (and re-attracts) the audience.

As demonstrated through these examples of Broadway musicals, their creatives and their leading ladies, the most successful star vehicles are musicals with lead characters portrayed by unconventional elite

³⁵⁹ Shenton, “Are We Running Out of Golden Age Musicals to Revive?”

³⁶⁰ This might even be valid for successful *concept* musicals like *Company*, as the already-mentioned 2021 Broadway revival with LuPone demonstrates.

Broadway belters.³⁶¹ As the number of Elphabas (just on Broadway) exemplifies, there are many high-quality belters waiting for a chance to stand out. Producing star theatre means taking risks by counting on one star to carry the show, but why not minimize the risk by counting on *two stars*, as was the case for Midler and Peters – or even more? The problem is that there is not really a *new generation* of Broadway *stars* comparable to the old, and there are no *new shows* comparable to the star vehicles of the 20th century. I agree with LuPone that “the playwrights are out there, and I think the producers are out there. It’s just a question of economics and support,”³⁶² to repeat her words from chapter 3.1.4. As seen by looking at the profit for *Hello Dolly!*’s revival – not to speak of its commercial success since 1964 – the long-term prospects to make money, to satisfy the audience, *and* to give birth to new Broadway stars is positive. Consequently, there is no reason *not* to create new star vehicles with a new generation of Broadway belters who will not be limited to copy pop-stars in jukebox musicals or to playing featured one-song parts.

However, I would argue that even new star vehicles and the Broadway Belt as their respective star are not enough to protect the legacy of *the Broadway Belt*. As *Hello Dolly!* and *Gypsy* demonstrate, star vehicles can be timelessly successful, but only if the lead part is a true *diva role*. Consequently, a musical’s star, the celebrated Broadway Belt recognized for her talent, needs to be a Broadway *diva*, a star with an unconventional actor’s personage of public interest. Thus the next chapter will examine elite Broadway belters as different *diva types* and their respective *diva roles*.

³⁶¹ I am consciously leaving out revived musicals like *Oklahoma!*, *The King and I*, *Kiss me Kate*, etc., because their lead characters are generally portrayed by a classically-trained performer, not a Broadway Belt.

³⁶² Itzkoff, “Don’t Dare Cry for These Old Friends”.

3.3 Divas and Diva Roles – A Mutual Agreement

At the beginning of chapter 3, I identified the term “diva” for my subject as a social construct built from the successful star and the actor’s personage. I will use the term now to examine Broadway belters who reached stardom through the combination of their talent and skills, their actor’s personage, and their public image, whether self-created or as perceived by the audience and critics.

Contrary to a pop diva or a concert prima donna who usually appears as herself on stage, a Broadway diva’s reputation is often based on the character she portrays. If the character is dislikable or presents behavior far from socially accepted female behavior, such a role is generally acknowledged as a *diva role*, especially if an elite Broadway performer gives an outsized performance in such a part. Then, due to what LuPone calls the “public confusion of her with character,” as mentioned in chapter 2.1, the audience mistakes the Broadway Belt easily for a “witch with a b.” Remembering that Sheryl Lee Ralph describes divas with a dislikable public attitude or outbursts in this way, I now introduce the term “b-diva” to differentiate this diva type from the idea of the diva as *the divine one*. The b-diva type portrays dislikable characters and there is a danger that her offstage behavior can provoke the audience to perceive her as being like the character. Although such a prejudice might disappear quickly, for example, due to a sympathetic encounter between the Broadway Belt and some audience members, it could also become a general opinion about the Broadway Belt based on her public behavior. As LuPone recognizes in different interviews, she is known as temperamental and saying always what she thinks, leading to her often being perceived as a typical b-diva.³⁶³ Thus the question arises if a little bit of a b-diva as an ingredient of the actor’s personage of a Broadway Belt might be necessary to play certain roles convincingly: Would it be imaginable to see Dame Lansbury playing Evita, or Channing playing

³⁶³ Patti LuPone cit. in Freeman, “Print that!” Broadway Legend Patti LuPone Sounds Off”. Or Mahita Gajanan, “Patti LuPone Snatches Phone from Texter during Shows for Days Play,” *The Guardian*, no. July 9 (2015), <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/jul/09/patti-lupone-takes-phone-texting-shows-for-days-theater>.

Rose? Would Peters be miscast as Mrs. Lovett, and would LuPone be a wrong choice for the parts of Mame or Dolly? For their rendition of some highly recognized diva roles, all these elite Broadway belters are frequently called divas in the *best* sense of the word. However, as divine as their performance is perceived, their actor's personages often are seen as corresponding with the character of their roles. Thus it will be interesting to examine the relationship between the diva and her respective portrayals.

3.3.1 Diva Roles

According to Michelle Dvoskin, *diva roles* represent “larger-than-life female characters who drive a musical’s action and encourage a virtuosic, outsized performance style.”³⁶⁴ If the diva role’s character is the driving force of a musical, the performance of such a part needs to be extremely convincing. The more authentic the character is perceived, the more the audience tends to believe that the actor’s personage of a Broadway Belt matches the character (as discussed in chapter 3.1). Consequently, depending on the musical’s story, diva roles that are *good* characters and those that are *bad* ones provoke a correspondingly positive or a negative perception of the Broadway belter’s actor’s personage. For example, a part that corresponds to the diva term’s definition of a *fine lady* is the typical *Big Lady diva role*, like Mame or Dolly. Although perceived as congenial, eccentric, stylish, persevering, and lovable, these larger-than-life characters remain socially well-positioned *ladies*, corresponding to a generally accepted social behavior of women in a certain era. Even though Mame lives an unconventional life full of parties, she has no affairs and marries the man she falls in love with. After his death, she returns to her active social life, without any scandal, taking care of unwed mothers and teaching her grand-nephew Peter the joy of living as she did with his father, Patrick.³⁶⁵ The widow Dolly Gallagher

³⁶⁴ Dvoskin, “Embracing Excess: The Queer Feminist Power of Musical Theatre Diva Roles.” 94.

³⁶⁵ The synopsis of this and all following cited musicals are generally well documented on each musical’s website or on other Broadway-musical-related websites; for example, see Valerie Rigsbee and Gary DuBreuil, “Broadway Musical Home,” accessed March 28, 2020.

Levi in *Hello, Dolly!* is a well-known matchmaker, but she convinces her client, Horace Vandergelder, step by step to marry her instead of someone else. Although these characters are unconventional and their female behavior cannot be seen as completely conservative, both parts represent the socially integrated, ladylike female type, originated by Lansbury and Channing. Their characters wear sumptuous costumes and gowns, act like ladies and have absolutely no brassy touch. These roles are not written for classical singers, but neither do they require a naturally loud, big belt voice because the use of stage microphones was already common in the 1960s. A Broadway belter's acting qualities, especially a certain talent for comedy, are crucial to fulfilling such a part.

Such lovable, nice ladies have nothing in common with Broadway musical's female villains, portrayed in *anti-hero* diva roles. According to Sally Mackey and Cooper Simon, such a diva role corresponds to "a protagonist who displays the less pleasant characteristics of human beings."³⁶⁶ The character of an anti-hero diva role is usually not especially attractive in the sense of looking like a magazine cover: she is not ugly, but she does not conform to the beauty ideal of the era. However, she is *interesting*: She can be brassy, Machiavellian, and ambitious, as are Evita, Norma Desmond, Roxie and Velma, Sally Bowles, Rose, and Mrs. Lovett. A typical example of such a diva role is Eva Perón in *Evita*. At the beginning of the musical, she is fifteen-year-old Eva Duarte, looking for a better life by following a tango singer to Buenos Aires. Climbing up the social ladder through personal relationships to become the First Lady of Argentina, this role is the very picture of a contradictory female diva role. On one side, her actions on Juan Perón's behalf during the elections are crucial for his win and her glamorous appearance promoting Perónism corresponds to her initial goal to reach fame and glory; on the other side, her charity work through the Eva Perón Foundation reveals her love for the people of Argentina. Prostituting herself to get out of the Buenos Aires slums and finally consecrating her life

<http://broadwaymusicalhome.com>.

³⁶⁶ Sally Mackey and Cooper Simon, *Drama and Theatre Studies* (Cheltenham, UK: Stanley Thornes Ltd, 2000). 75.

to the well-being of the Argentinian people,³⁶⁷ Eva Perón is a diva role that needs not only the ability to portray an anti-hero diva but also to play the reformation of the character into a Big Lady diva, the divine “Santa Evita,” a title given to her by devoted supporters. Besides the high demands on acting, this diva role is extremely difficult to sing due to passages that are too high for an alto voice and others too low for a soprano voice. As mentioned in chapter 2.4.1, LuPone considers this part the worst experience of her life,³⁶⁸ but she won her first Tony for it.

Evita’s composer was Webber, who would write *Sunset Boulevard* and its diva role, Norma Desmond, in 1991. The character Norma Desmond was a movie diva before the musical’s story begins and goes insane due to her lost stardom. As Evita, LuPone originated this part, but this time in London’s West End, while Glenn Close triumphed on Broadway.³⁶⁹ The characters Norma and Evita resemble each other as divas, but in reverse: Apparently, Norma was a celebrated movie diva, a divine one, loved by the audience before the musical’s plot begins; then, turning insane, she becomes an anti-hero diva, blackmailing Gillyis through her attempted suicide. In contrast, Eva Perón grows from an anti-hero into the divine one. The part of Norma demands strong acting, like Evita, but high-quality belting is dispensable, contrary to Evita. Although both characters are anti-heroes, they have a tragic end, going insane and dying of cancer, respectively.³⁷⁰

In contrast, there is absolutely nothing ladylike or divine to find in the anti-hero diva role of *Sweeney Todd*’s Nellie Lovett, even though her existence is equally tragic. It was the character actress Lansbury who transformed the meat-pie baking character, who helps to get rid of the

³⁶⁷ Her sacrifice is arguable, since Eva’s counterpart in the musical, Che, suspects her charity work of using the Foundation for money laundering in the song “And the Money Kept Rolling In (And Out).”

³⁶⁸ Green, “Let Her Entertain You, Please!”

³⁶⁹ The story about Webber breaking LuPone’s contract to portray Norma on Broadway can be found on different websites; for example, see The New York Times, “LuPone Settlement on ‘Sunset,’” *The New York Times*, no. May 18 (1994): <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/05/18/theater/lupone-settlement-on-sunset.html>.

³⁷⁰ The tragic destiny of these characters portrayed by Broadway divas is comparable to those of opera characters like Lucia in *Lucia di Lammermoor* or Violetta in *La Traviata*, but these diva roles are remarkably different from each other, as are the respective divas portraying such characters.

people Sweeney Todd has killed, into an iconic diva role, one in which LuPone also would earn another Tony nomination in the show's 2006 revival.³⁷¹ Mrs. Lovett is not the leading lady character in the show, a reason why Lansbury first did not want to play the part. "Listen, Steve, your show is not called *Nellie Lovett*. It's called *Sweeney Todd*. And I'm the second banana,"³⁷² recalls Gottfried Lansbury saying to Sondheim. However, Lansbury accepted the role after Prince agreed to give her the final, solo bow.³⁷³ The portrayal of Mrs. Lovett became another Broadway musical triumph for her and she won her fourth Tony for it.³⁷⁴ There is probably no anti-hero diva role in Broadway musical theatre that could be perceived as more disgusting than Mrs. Lovett, cutting humans into pieces and baking meat pies of them. However, she was not considered a "monster," as was the case for Rose in *Gypsy*. Driven by her unlimited ambitions, Rose pushes her children on stage in vaudeville. This anti-hero diva role brought both Lansbury and LuPone another Tony. While Mrs. Lovett is – at least until the end – a comedic character and a musically demanding part for an actress, Rose is vocally and dramatically demanding.³⁷⁵ Nevertheless, like *Evita* but unlike Lovett, Rose does not kill anyone.

In *Chicago*, Roxie and Velma did. These two anti-hero diva roles for two triple-threat Broadway belters were originated by Gwen Verdon and Chita Rivera. One killing her lover and the other killing her sister and her husband, they try everything possible to get away with murder and succeed. Due to the circumstances, they "can't do it alone"³⁷⁶ and team up to become vaudeville stars. Equally ambitious is the star of the Kit Kat Club, *Cabaret*'s Sally Bowles, another unlikable anti-hero diva role. Contrary to Roxie who faked her pregnancy to get out of jail, Sally has an abortion in favor of her more or less existing career.

³⁷¹ "Tony Award Winners".

³⁷² Angela Lansbury cit. in Gottfried, *Balancing Act – The Authorized Biography of Angela Lansbury*. 230, 231.

³⁷³ Ibid.

³⁷⁴ For further information see <https://www.tonyawards.com/history/year-by-year/>.

³⁷⁵ Remembering that Sondheim's music is musically more difficult to sing, while Styne's melodic tunes in *Gypsy* demand high-quality belting.

³⁷⁶ "I can't do it alone" is the title of one of Velma's song in *Chicago*.

Neither a Big Lady diva nor an anti-hero diva like the aforementioned, is Effie White in *Dreamgirls*, who cannot really be blamed for her destiny. At the beginning of the musical, the ambitious Effie demonstrates a strong independent attitude, but finds herself quickly pushed aside as the lead singer of a girl group in favor of her skinny, good-looking friend. Expelled from the group and rejected by the man she loves, Effie bursts out her emotions in the typical “act-1-finale-of-female-self-assertion song,”³⁷⁷ “And I Am Telling You I’m Not Going.” The performance of this diva role, and especially this song, is emotionally and vocally intense. The injustice done to the character in favor of commercial success leaves her a single mother without work or money, and heartbroken. Nevertheless, the show ends happily-ever-after, when she has a hit song on her own, reconciles with her friends, and presents her daughter to the girl’s father, rejoining the chorus line of the group for a farewell presentation. Although Effie is ambitious, she is not ruthless and does not fight for her interests. She is also too young to be a Big Lady. Effie is certainly a diva role, but she needs to be considered an exceptional part, one that only few African-American musical belters can accomplish.

Anti-hero diva roles correspond to Susan J. Leonardi’s and Rebecca A. Pope’s description of divas as “larger than life Chameleon, protean, vampiric, dramatic, regal, seductive, powerful, manipulative, ambitious, generous, life-enhancing, life-altering, extravagant.”³⁷⁸ Some of them also can be seen as “people who desperately want *in* to American society,”³⁷⁹ as Raymond Knapp describes the anti-heroes in Sondheim’s musical *Assassins*. In any case, anti-hero diva roles attract attention through their non-conformity. They are not “normal.” They are obsessed by ambition, insane or ruthless, while Big Lady diva roles are just unconventional versions of middle- and upper-class gender stereotypes, still fitting into the era’s social order.

³⁷⁷ This a conventional song type in Broadway musical theatre, as is the “I want song” and the “eleven-o’clock-number.” See Wolf, *Changed for Good – A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*. Pos. 131.

³⁷⁸ Susan J. Leonardi and Rebecca A. Pope cit. in Michelle Dvoskin, “Listen to the Stories, Hear it in the Songs: Musical Theatre as Queer Historiography” (Dissertation, The University of Texas at Austin, 2010). 100.

³⁷⁹ Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005). 164.

Today, these diva roles need a recognized elite Broadway Belt. However, Lansbury and LuPone, for example, were not stars when they achieved their signature roles, but cemented their star status with these and their subsequent diva portrayals. Generally, there are other parts that must be portrayed first, before getting a chance to portray such a diva role. Young triple threats or elite belting and acting female performers can shine in parts that I would call *up-and-coming diva roles*. At first glance, these characters have no qualities that resemble a diva, but they generally reach their goal at the end of the musical. They are lovable, unconventional characters, sometimes naïve, often overweight, more or less nuts, or even green, but always equipped with a special talent. I place in this category characters like Annie Oakley, Fanny Brice, Peggy Sawyer, Tracy Turnblad, and Elphaba.

The up-and-coming diva role represents what I call a peculiar *Doris-Day-personage*, a little bit naïve but endlessly lovable, talented, and independent as long as necessary to get the guy or to become a star (and mostly getting the guy, too).³⁸⁰ In a few exceptions, she becomes a star without getting the guy. Interestingly, in this latter case, the musical is considered to be a musical *drama*, not a musical comedy. All these up-and-coming diva roles need strong Broadway belters with comic or exceptionally dramatic acting talent. Being younger than the typical elite Broadway Belt, they cannot be as experienced as her, but they demonstrate their talent in such roles.

Sharpshooter Annie Oakley is a naïve, independent young woman until she meets womanizer Frank Butler in Irving Berlin's *Annie Get Your Gun*. Since she "can't get a man with a gun,"³⁸¹ she deliberately loses a shooting match against Frank to see her dream of an old-fashioned wedding fulfilled. Young Fanny Brice, the diva role in *Funny Girl*, becomes a star due to her comic talent. However, she finds herself publicly humiliated by her gambling husband, Nick Arnstein, who lands in prison. They are separated and she is heartbroken, but, at least, she remains a star. In *42nd Street*, the inexperienced country girl Peggy

³⁸⁰ I refer to the female characters Doris Day portrayed in her most iconic movies, not herself.

³⁸¹ "You Can't Get a Man with a Gun" is the title of one of Annie Oakley's songs.

Sawyer becomes a star due to her tremendous dancing talent – and the fact that she is accidentally responsible for the broken leg of the show's star. She saves the show unpretentiously and falls in love on her way to stardom, but that is just a convenient side effect while accomplishing the show's finale with its main title, "Lullaby of Broadway."

These characters are nice young women mostly falling into life's unpredictable traps but rising like a phoenix. So is Tracy Turnblad in *Hairspray*. The young, overweight girl is crazy about Link Larkin, the young, womanizing male star of a radio show, but she is nevertheless more focused on achieving stardom, a graduate degree in musicology, and her fight for racial integration. She wins Link's heart over Barbie-like Amber von Tussle and achieves her goal to become the star of the "Corny Collins Show." Additionally, she wins the fight over racial integration on the show. About the same age is the character Elphaba in *Wicked*, a green-skinned, "weird" schoolgirl. Lovable through her pitiable destiny as a young girl with green skin, she is the victim of mistakable circumstances. Her only way out is pretending to die, escaping with her love subject, Fiero, and being remembered as the "Wicked Witch of the West." These up-and-coming diva roles are a category apart because they are generally played by belting actresses up to their mid-30s. These roles offer them the chance to be part of the next generation of elite Broadway belters.³⁸²

Three categories of diva roles can only represent the most frequent characters portrayed by elite Broadway belters and their young successors. In summary, the Big Lady diva role has always an elegance, something of a classy dame with a matriarchal effect, looking *divine*, while the anti-hero character corresponds generally to a brassy and ambitious woman using socially unacceptable methods to reach her goal. The Big Lady pulls the strings and wins, while the anti-hero only *seems* to pull the strings but does not reach her original goal at the end. The up-and-coming diva, meanwhile, is adorable or at least appeals to sympathy or mercy. She usually ends happily-ever-after in the arms

³⁸² Although the original Annie Oakley was portrayed by recognized Broadway star Ethel Merman at age 38, and by Bernadette Peters at age 51 in the 1999 revival, a younger musical performer would be a more realistic casting, as is generally the case for comparable newer Broadway musicals.

of a man, becomes a huge star, or both. Big Lady diva roles need big actor's personages and elite acting qualities, but less belt voice, while anti-hero diva roles need high-quality belting *and* acting talents above all. The up-and-coming diva roles are portrayed by promising young belters who need their belt voice *and* special talent – mostly being an accomplished triple threat – *or* the stereotypical requirements to portray special attributes – for example, being naïve, overweight, or having unconventional looks.

No matter what, all these parts represent, without exception, strong women, pursuing their goals against all odds and rules. They are *feminist* roles. When Michelle Dvoskin states that “*diva roles* represent feminist cultural critique,”³⁸³ she points to a character trait the diva role *and* the diva herself need to have in common: a *feminist attitude*. With this in mind, I will examine in the next chapter at which point the actor's personages of elite Broadway belters correspond to their diva roles and, possibly, a certain diva type.

3.3.2 Diva Types

The reputation of a Broadway Belt as a diva is born through an outsized performance in a diva role plus her actor's personage. For the examples of some elite Broadway belters, I will examine if my categorization into three types of diva roles generally corresponds to the respective actor's personage of an elite Broadway Belt and will consider potential crossovers from her corresponding diva role to another.

Dame Angela Lansbury was not only made *Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire* by Queen Elizabeth II in 2014³⁸⁴ but she is also well-known to behave like a lady at all times and has said about herself that she “always tries to be very classy.”³⁸⁵ Nevertheless, she also has had her outbursts, for example during rehearsals for *Anyone Can*

³⁸³ Dvoskin, “Embracing Excess: The Queer Feminist Power of Musical Theatre Diva Roles.” 94.

³⁸⁴ Lizo Mzimba, “New Year's Honours: Lansbury and Keith become Dames,” *British Broadcast Corporation*, no. December 31 (2013), <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-25550751>.

³⁸⁵ Angela Lansbury cit. in Shapiro, *Nothing Like A Dame – Conversations with the Great Women of Musical Theater*. Pos. 1914.

Whistle. As Gottfried describes, she “jumped from her chair, opened the door, and, in a burst of rage, shrieked down the backstage stairwell at the men she referred to as ‘The Group’ – Laurents, Sondheim, and Ross – ‘What do you want? What do you want me to do?’”³⁸⁶ However, that even was artistically motivated; it happened behind closed doors in a rehearsing process and not in public. (Otherwise, she might be considered a b-diva, complicated to work with.) In any *public* circumstances, Lansbury always demonstrates class and never leaves her actor’s personage of a classy *lady*, behaving in a way that is “traditionally considered to be suitable for a woman.”³⁸⁷ As Knapp states, musical numbers “impose, through its obvious and conventional artificiality, a kind of mask that both conceals and calls attention to the performer behind the persona.”³⁸⁸ Lansbury is a character actress and her acting qualities are highly appreciated, but she will always shine through the character she is playing. Even seeing her as Mrs. Lovett or Rose, her anti-hero diva roles, the audience can recognize Lansbury, the Dame; no one would think that her real character is like the roles she portrays. “In a musical, no matter how expertly presented, the performer can never truly disappear into their role,”³⁸⁹ confirms Dvoskin. This is also true for Channing. Considered a “larger-than-life luminary,”³⁹⁰ and as different to Lansbury as she was, she never demonstrated anything of a b-diva attitude. Called a “daffy blonde”³⁹¹ with an “indomitable personality,”³⁹² she maintained her diva status, but very differently to Lansbury: According to Shapiro, for many years Channing “wouldn’t be caught dead without a wig.”³⁹³ She wore always a big blonde wig and

³⁸⁶ Gottfried, *Balancing Act – The Authorized Biography of Angela Lansbury*. 144.

³⁸⁷ s.v. “shout.”

³⁸⁸ Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity*. 12.

³⁸⁹ Dvoskin, “Embracing Excess: The Queer Feminist Power of Musical Theatre Diva Roles.” 96.

³⁹⁰ Mike Barnes and Duane Byrge, “Carol Channing, Effervescent Stage Star of ‘Hello, Dolly!’ and ‘Gentlemen Prefer Blondes,’ Dies at 97,” *The Hollywood Reporter* no. January 15 (2019), <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/carl-channing-dead-hello-dolly-gentlemen-prefer-blondes-star-was-97-719741>.

³⁹¹ Ibid.

³⁹² Harlan Boll cit. in ibid.

³⁹³ Shapiro, *Nothing Like A Dame – Conversations with the Great Women of Musical Theater*. Pos. 812.

full make-up in public. As Shapiro cites her, “I looked very washed out without it. ... I didn’t decide, I looked in the mirror! ‘Oh my gosh! You gotta get your eyelashes on.’”³⁹⁴ Channing brought the appearance of her signature role into her offstage life and, in a certain way, turned her actor’s personage into a Big Lady diva role. As Stacy Wolf writes, “The diva is both an on- and offstage phenomenon; she is both the character and the self.”³⁹⁵ Although agreeing with Wolf concerning Channing’s diva type, it is necessary to point out that Lansbury always has drawn a line between herself and her diva roles. In contrast, Bernadette Peters’s diva-hood appears in another look.

Peters is not exactly the classy dame like Lansbury, and neither is she the quirky, naïve type she occasionally plays, like Annie in *Annie Get Your Gun* or Miss Hannigan in the musical film *Annie*. I would argue that her actor’s personage nearly fits into any diva role. She plays Rose and Dolly in a way that Arthur Laurents has called her quality of “experienced innocence.”³⁹⁶ As Chip Crews states, “She can be sexy or sultry or coy, but she’s never vulgar – and never false,”³⁹⁷ and James Lapine similarly characterizes Peters as a “loving, generous person, and I think it comes through in her performances as well.”³⁹⁸ Peters has held on to her being-lovable factor from her time as a young, promising performer and is able to cross over from a Big Lady diva role to her own version of an anti-hero diva. Wolf says that “spectators are always aware that performers are performing. The musical theatre diva, then, is a relational construct whose success depends on both performance and reception.”³⁹⁹ Consequently, if the audience, critics, and even coworkers see her as consistently “nice and cute,” on- and offstage, it is understandable that her interpretation of *Gypsy*’s Rose was largely criticized when Peters portrayed her as more vulnerable and less fierce. Her audience did not want to see her in such a “bad” character. In contrast, as The

³⁹⁴ Carol Channing cit. in *ibid.* Pos. 812.

³⁹⁵ Wolf, *Changed for Good – A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*. Pos. 4736.

³⁹⁶ Arthur Laurents cit. in Chip Crews, “Broadway’s Bernadette Peters: Viva the Diva, Her Fans Say,” *Los Angeles Times*, no. January 12 (1999), <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1999-jan-12-ca-62620-story.html>.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁸ James Lapine cit. in *ibid.*

³⁹⁹ Wolf, *Changed for Good – A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*. Pos. 4736.

Witch in *Into the Woods*, her only other anti-hero diva role besides Rose, she accentuated the comic side of the part and got laughs. Here, the audience knew that The Witch was just an imaginary figure (and that Peters could not be a witch). Since, as per Wolf, the audience always sees the professional performer behind the diva roles, and since the fans have known Peters for so long and admire her for her actor's personage, no anti-hero role can destroy her image. Nevertheless, as flexible as Peters is as an actress, anti-hero diva roles do not correspond the best to her actor's personage.

Contrary to the trajectory of Peters, it was the anti-hero diva role in *Evita* that boosted LuPone's career. From then on, the audience, critics, and creatives saw her mainly in such parts. "I went into 'Evita' as a Juilliard-trained actor, and I came out as Evita,"⁴⁰⁰ LuPone states. This anti-hero character brought her the image of a b-diva, and her public behavior did not help to rectify this characterization. LuPone admits she is partially responsible for this when she confirms to "always speak my truth, and it's not necessarily appropriate in the environment"⁴⁰¹ (see chapter 3.1.1). Snapping during rehearsals and screaming "Shut up!"⁴⁰², destroying the furnishings of her dressing room⁴⁰³; or interrupting a show to stop someone in the audience using the mobile phone"⁴⁰⁴ sustain the public reception of her actor's personage. Although LuPone played more than just anti-hero diva roles, as she also took on the likable part of Reno Sweeney in *Anything Goes* and the deplorable Fantine in *Les Misérables*, her rendition of *Gypsy*'s Rose, Nellie Lovett, and *Company*'s Joanne are anti-hero diva roles representing LuPone's highest achievements. Recognized for her professionalism and talent as an

⁴⁰⁰ Heller, "Patti LuPone on Her 'Painful' Rise to Broadway Stardom: 'I Was My Biggest Enemy!'".

⁴⁰¹ Freeman, "Print that! Broadway Legend Patti LuPone Sounds Off".

⁴⁰² Ibid.

⁴⁰³ Heller, "Patti LuPone on Her 'Painful' Rise to Broadway Stardom: 'I Was My Biggest Enemy!'".

⁴⁰⁴ Gajanan, "Patti LuPone Snatches Phone from Texter during Shows for Days Play"; ibid.

elite Broadway Belt, she is called “the divine one,”⁴⁰⁵ but her anti-hero diva roles and her offstage behavior always push her once again into the b-diva category. Offstage, LuPone repeatedly claims not to be a diva at all: “During ‘Evita’ I was constantly harassed … to dress up,” she says. “I was a star. There is an illusion you’re expected to present. … I regret it sometimes when I’m out, I’m recognized, and I look like a dog. But this is who I am.”⁴⁰⁶ Her look offstage does not demonstrate her to be a diva, but, contradicting this, her outspoken demeanor reinforces her diva image. LuPone insists: “I’m totally Italian, and it’s a big personality. But I’m not a diva. If you could see the way I’m dressed in daily life, that’s not a diva. Appearances are so not important to me.”⁴⁰⁷ While LuPone defines a diva exclusively through appearance and strongly attempts to make people forget her b-diva reputation through her look, she then rebuilds that image with each public outburst.

On the contrary, Ethel Merman never tried to get rid of being called the “brass diva”; this even became the title of a biography.⁴⁰⁸ Using her penetrating voice offstage as loudly as she belted out her songs on stage, her reputation grew with each public outburst – often using vulgar language that Lansbury might never even had heard of. Wolf states that “Merman’s butchness,⁴⁰⁹ in a manner makes her quite legible [transparent] and points to lesbian stereotypes.”⁴¹⁰ However, I will not discuss the Broadway Belt in the context of lesbianism since I consider the b-diva type at most to be a gender stereotype, independently of any personal sexual orientation – which is not part of my subject. Although Merman’s diva image mainly corresponds to the b-diva type, some of her roles correspond more to Big Lady diva roles – but “the wisecracking dame,”⁴¹¹

⁴⁰⁵ Peter Marks, “A Diva’s Life Isn’t Always Happy; Ask Callas (and LuPone),” *The New York Times*, no. June 30 (1996), <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/06/30/theater/a-diva-s-life-isn-t-always-happy-ask-callas-and-lupone.html>. See also: Clive Paget, “Patti LuPone – Diva Divine (and Direct),” *Lime Light Magazine*, no. June 7 (2018), <https://www.limelightmagazine.com.au/features/patti-lupone-diva-divine-and-direct/>.

⁴⁰⁶ Sacks, “She’s the Top.”

⁴⁰⁷ Patti LuPone cit. in Internet Movie Database, “Patti LuPone Quotes.”

⁴⁰⁸ See Flinn, *Brass Diva: The Life and Legends of Ethel Merman*.

⁴⁰⁹ “Butchness” is a term used for women with more masculine traits.

⁴¹⁰ Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria – Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical*. 175.

⁴¹¹ Merman and Ells, *Merman*. 66.

like Reno Sweeney in *Anything Goes* or Mrs. Sally Adams in *Call Me Madam*, not the elegant *Lansbury* diva type. As for LuPone, one of her life's philosophies was "Loud, but honest,"⁴¹² and in each part she played, her big, loud belt voice overrode any other impression. Merman liked to portray such diva roles, but she called anti-hero Rose "her favorite role."⁴¹³ Although Wolf states that Rose and Merman merge, especially in "Rose's Turn," *Gypsy*'s eleven-o-clock-number,⁴¹⁴ I would rather argue that the "professional brassy dame,"⁴¹⁵ (as she saw herself) consciously identified herself with all her diva roles, because this was her understanding of acting. Additionally, most parts of her career were written for her, so the character of *any* diva role she played fitted Merman's actor's personage and reinforced the effect her portrayal had on the audience. Contrary to Channing, who staged her diva type by taking over the attributes of the diva role, Merman's actor's personage *was* the brassy diva type, and she portrayed her diva roles as such. While Lansbury and Peters each remain true to their chosen diva type, independently of their roles, LuPone denies her diva status; however, she cannot help confirming it when situations provoke a b-diva-style outburst.

To summarize, for a Broadway Belt to be called diva, her diva type and diva roles usually need to *conform* to one another: The better the diva role corresponds to the diva type the Broadway Belt wants to be and/or that her major talent allows, the better the audience perceives her as such and the easier it is for her to build her actor's personage in favor of comparable future diva roles. Millie Taylor explains:

The more the performer and character seem identical the more there is the appearance of 'iconic identity' ... Whether or not the performer is a star, there are times in a theatre performance when audiences can become more or less aware of these layers of representation, seeing the body sometimes as that of the performer and sometimes that of the character, but mostly moving between and blending these positions.⁴¹⁶

⁴¹² Ibid. 9.

⁴¹³ Ibid. 206.

⁴¹⁴ Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria – Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical*. 128.

⁴¹⁵ Merman and Eells, *Merman*. 7.

⁴¹⁶ Taylor and Symonds, *Studying Musical Theatre – Theory and Practice*. 220.

The “layers of representation” are explained by Bert O. States as being the *self-expressive mode* (the performer plays a character), the *collaborative mode* (the character addresses the audience directly), and the *representational mode* (the performer merges with the character and the audience perceives the story happening before their eyes).⁴¹⁷ Thus, if the audience moves between seeing the performer and the character, and blends these positions, the Broadway Belt portraying a diva role is easily *perceived* as the diva type that fits her diva roles most closely.

However, as demonstrated, most Broadway divas also portray diva roles that do not fit their diva type and that show the Broadway Belt exclusively in a self-expressive mode, such as Peters portraying The Witch. Here, Peters gives a performance. According to Richard Schechner, performing is a combination of ‘being’, ‘doing’, and ‘showing doing’.⁴¹⁸ Thus, if Schechner states that “‘showing doing’ is performing, pointing to, underlining, and displaying ‘doing’,”⁴¹⁹ such diva roles demonstrate the “showing doing” of the performer, her talent, and her learned skills.

When Wolf claims that “in Rose’s failure is Merman’s success,”⁴²⁰ she strengthens my argument that Rose, the only anti-hero diva role Merman ever played, is the link between Merman’s actor’s personage, perceived as a b-diva type, her singing talent and her acting (showing doing). Thus the diva role of her biggest success corresponded to her actor’s personage, as is the case for most of LuPone’s anti-hero diva roles, as well as Peters’s Dot, Lansbury’s Mame, and Channing’s Dolly. The diva role and the diva type fertilize each other and function at their best in a sort of mutual agreement.

In this combination, and independently of the respective diva type, the elite Broadway Belt should be recognized as a *true diva*. I introduce the term *true diva* to make a clear difference between being a Broadway diva due to the elite belter’s talent and confirmed through her stardom and her perceived and demonstrated actor’s personage, and *real-life* b-divas, perceived as “egoistical, self-centered, high maintenance,

⁴¹⁷ Ibid. 219.

⁴¹⁸ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge 2002), 28.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid. 28.

⁴²⁰ Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria – Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical*. 128.

spoiled little brats.”⁴²¹ As Sheryl Lee Ralph states, “These women give *Diva* a bad name. A real Diva [true diva] – the kind who makes you sit up and take notice in a good way – is a woman of strength, character, and a beauty that radiates from within. She copies no one. She is her own woman.”⁴²² As a true diva, the elite Broadway Belt generally *performs her actor's personage* to be the diva type that fits the respective diva role (Big Lady or anti-hero). However, in diva roles that do not correspond to her image, she *performs an imagined figure* with which she cannot be identified, as seen in the characters The Witch or Mrs. Lovett.

According to Dvoskin, “in a culture where normative femininity positions women as passive and located in the private sphere of the home, a woman who sings loudly and demands attention in the public space of performance challenges normative ideas of gender.”⁴²³ For this reason, if a diva role “breaks the bound of normative femininity,”⁴²⁴ the Broadway belter’s actor’s personage, diva type, and diva roles cannot be classified within a general normative perception of gender. As Judith Butler writes, “The act that one does, the act that one performs is, in a sense, an act that’s been going on before one arrived on the scene.”⁴²⁵ In other words, when Channing becomes “Dolly” offstage, Lansbury *behaves* offstage always classily, Peters *accepts* her forever-cute image, and LuPone *fights against* her b-diva image, each practices *gender performance*.⁴²⁶ However, when the true diva performs a crossover diva type in the role of an

⁴²¹ Ralph, *Redefining DIVA – Life Lessons from the Original Dreamgirl*. Pos. 155.

⁴²² Ibid. Pos. 155.

⁴²³ Dvoskin, “Embracing Excess: The Queer Feminist Power of Musical Theatre Diva Roles.” 95.

⁴²⁴ Ibid. 94.

⁴²⁵ Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution – An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” in *Performance – Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. Philip Auslander (London: Routledge, 2003). 104.

⁴²⁶ “Gender performance is the idea that gender is something inscribed in daily practices, learned and performed based on cultural norms of femininity and masculinity. The idea of gender as performance was popularized by American poststructuralist philosopher Judith Butler. . . . The main point of gender performance is that neither gender nor sex is completely natural, and both are performed and become naturalized over time: we act and walk and talk in ways that consolidate the idea of ‘being a man’ or ‘being a woman.’” Janaina Figueira. “Gender Performance.” In The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Gender and Sexuality Studies. Wiley Online Library: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2016. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/action/doSearch?AllField=Gender+performance&ContentGroupKey=10.1002%2F9781118663219>.

imagined figure, or when Merman accepts her b-diva image and lives with it while LuPone fights against but confirms it through outbursts and outspoken behavior, they also practice gender performance, but *unconventionally*. According to Dvoskin, such women “challenge all sorts of ‘regimes of the normal’ held sacred in contemporary U.S. culture.”⁴²⁷ This challenge is nothing else than exercised feminism.

Consequently, the true divas and her unconventional gender performance on stage unmask the elite Broadway Belt as a *feminist*. The next chapter will present the actor’s personage of a Broadway Belt and the characters she is playing as *idiosyncratic* feminists.

3.4 Belting and Feminism – Belting Out and Speaking Up

Speaking up and belting out are both terms frequently found in the context of a Broadway Belt. While belting out concerns the artistic expression of singing with a voluminous voice in favor of a role’s interpretation in musical theatre, speaking up applies to the actor’s personage who takes a public position concerning a social or political matter. If such a social or political matter concerns women’s rights, a woman speaking up generally is considered to be a feminist, a person supporting *feminism*. According to Noelle McAfee,

Feminism is both an intellectual commitment and a political movement that seeks justice for women and the end of sexism in all forms. Motivated by the quest for social justice, feminist inquiry provides a wide range of perspectives on social, cultural, economic, and political phenomena.⁴²⁸

⁴²⁷ Dvoskin, “Embracing Excess: The Queer Feminist Power of Musical Theatre Diva Roles.” 96.

⁴²⁸ Noelle McAfee, “Feminist Philosophy,” accessed March 31, 2020. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/feminist-philosophy/>.

Based on this explanation, in the context of my subject, I will use the term “feminist” for a self-confident, independent woman who commits intellectually to feminism and stands up for her opinions.

Although it is crucial to acknowledge the difference between a feminist role and a feminist actor’s personage, at the same time recognizing a certain interrelationship is unavoidable. This chapter will put feminist roles and Broadway belters succeeding in such roles in the context of feminism in American society.

Certainly, a feminist role cannot be directly identified with a feminist actor’s personage, but the Broadway Belt and the character she portrays usually are on the same page when it comes to women’s rights. Listings of characters of independent, strong-willed women in Broadway musical theatre are mainly composed of leading parts for a Broadway Belt.⁴²⁹ As early as 1934, Cole Porter’s *Anything Goes* offered Ethel Merman the part of Reno Sweeney, a self-confident nightclub singer.⁴³⁰ Even though characters like Dolly and Mame became outsized heroines of female independence in Broadway musical theatre in the 1960s,⁴³¹ these roles still follow traditional values like marriage (Dolly) and maternal responsibility (Mame), and the leading character in the respective Broadway musical is defined through her relationship to a man.⁴³² Annie Oakley in *Annie Get Your Gun* is clever enough to choose a man who respects her shooting talent; nevertheless, she has to let him win to build up his self-confidence – and to trick him into proposing. *Oklahoma!* (1943) presents in Ado Annie a female character who enjoys flirting with different men, pretending that she “can’t say ‘No’”⁴³³ – but she immediately stops flirting around when the right guy can fulfill her father’s conditions for marriage. Other female characters in Broadway musical the-

⁴²⁹ For example, see Google LLC, “Broadway Musical Roles of Strong, Independent Women,” accessed June 3, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=Broadway+musical+roles+of+strong+independent+women.

⁴³⁰ Similar roles existed even earlier in time, but they were less significant, especially concerning the leading lady playing the part.

⁴³¹ Laurie Winer, “Why Sondheim’s Women Are Different,” *The New York Times*, no. November 26 (1989): <https://www.nytimes.com/1989/11/26/theater/why-sondheim-s-women-are-different.html>.

⁴³² Ibid.

⁴³³ “I Can’t Say No” is Ado Annie’s principal song in *Oklahoma!*

atre are women who fall in love with the wrong guy, as is Julie in *Showboat* (1927) or Mabel in Jerry Herman's *Mack and Mabel* in 1974. Such characters, due to the lack of a good man, die, lose their mind, or end up sad and deranged, as is usually the case in opera (see chapter 3.3.1).

According to Stacy Wolf, it was in the 1950s that gender roles were "among the most conservative of any period in U.S. history."⁴³⁴ Women could work professionally, but they shouldn't. While women were welcome to replace men during World War II to take on the men's jobs, now, in the 1950s, they had to make way for the men returning from abroad.⁴³⁵ A middle-class woman's goal should be kitchen, church, and children, as it was before the war. Successful television shows had exclusively nuclear-family-oriented subjects, featuring white middle-class families.⁴³⁶ In contrast, Broadway musicals from the era rarely represent a mother – except for *Gypsy*'s Mama Rose.⁴³⁷ In fact, feminism in Broadway musical theatre began with *Gypsy* "to free the musical heroine from her past,"⁴³⁸ as Sondheim says, and to redefine "the musical's feminine ideals."⁴³⁹ As Winer states:

Mr. Sondheim imagined in these women a development that goes far deeper than economic independence and is far richer than Rose's ambition and her brittle renunciation of men; he has depicted a sea-change in their approach to life. To the women who came after Rose, love is not a birthright or a necessity for a sane and happy life. It is a gift that alters them forever, to be treasured even after it is taken away.⁴⁴⁰

From his professional beginnings, Sondheim experimented with a new female prototype and created a wide variety of independent women.⁴⁴¹ In 1965, *Anyone Can Whistle*'s song "With So Little To Be Sure Of" presented the heroine separating from a man with serenity and mutual respect,

⁴³⁴ Wolf, *Changed for Good – A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*. Pos. 606.

⁴³⁵ Ibid. Pos. 595-606.

⁴³⁶ Ibid. Pos. 639.

⁴³⁷ Ibid. Pos. 661.

⁴³⁸ Winer, "Why Sondheim's Women Are Different."

⁴³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid.

which was unusual on the stage of Broadway musical theatre at this time, not to mention in real life.⁴⁴² Desiree Armfeldt in *A Little Night Music* (1973) regrets that (at first) she cannot win back a lover of her past, while Mrs. Lovett and Rose are the driving forces in *Sweeney Todd* (1979) and *Gypsy* (1959), respectively. Wives filled with bitterness like Phyllis in *Follies* (1971), harsh philosophers like Joanne in *Company* (1970), and The Witch in *Into the Woods* (1986) present women on their own.⁴⁴³ These characters are not defined by the relationships in their life, but entirely by their “hard-fought and often moving journey towards self-knowledge,”⁴⁴⁴ as Winer says. Hence, between the 1960s and 1980s, many female characters in Broadway musical theatre corresponded to the yearnings of American women in this period called the *second wave of feminism* in US-American society, which will be addressed in the next chapter.

Beginning my observations concerning the Broadway Belt, their feminist actor's personage, and their feminist roles, it is necessary to briefly turn back to the *first* wave of feminism.

3.4.1 Feminist Broadway Belters and Feminist Roles

The first wave of feminism started at the Seneca Falls convention in 1848, where about 200 women discussed women's rights.⁴⁴⁵ The *suffragettes* went on to fight for achieving political equality until the 19th Amendment, the women's right to vote, had been passed by the congress in 1920.⁴⁴⁶ At this time, Broadway musical theatre was still at its beginnings. However, according to Kenrick, the 1920s were “the busiest decade Broadway would ever know, with as many as fifty new musicals opening in a single season.”⁴⁴⁷ In 1932, the last vaudeville show closed at the Palace Theatre, but the Broadway musical reached new creative

⁴⁴² Ibid.

⁴⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁵ National Park Service – U.S. Department of the Interior, “Women's Rights – The 19th Amendment,” accessed April 1, 2020. <https://www.nps.gov/wori/learn/historyculture/2020-crash-course.htm>.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁷ John Kenrick, “History of The Musical Stage 1920s: ‘Keep the Sun Smilin’ Through,’” accessed November 4, 2017. <http://www.musicals101.com/1920bway.htm>.

heights with the Gershwin brothers, Rodgers and Hart, Jerome Kern, and Cole Porter.⁴⁴⁸ The Great Depression of these years did not stop the rise of Broadway musical theatre. The stardom of Merman and Channing began in the aftermath of the 19th Amendment and paved the way for self-confident women in corresponding roles on Broadway.

Merman was not a feminist in the sense of taking public political positions or fighting for women's rights, but she never hesitated to speak up. As she described herself, "I am also known to be able to take care of myself when I become angry. I don't mince words. If somebody needs telling off, he'll get it without barrels. A friend can double-cross me once – then, fing! May be that's one of my problems: I'm too honest."⁴⁴⁹ Wolf characterizes her as "direct, aggressive, and physically tough."⁴⁵⁰ She also states, that "Merman lacked shyness about virtually any issue. At times she is described as immodest or without feminine sensitivity and is often called 'flip' or 'brash.'"⁴⁵¹ Merman's actor's personage corresponded more to the lower-class origins of some of her vaudeville predecessors like Sophie Tucker and Marilyn Miller, even though she grew up in a middle-class social environment. As Wolf states, "Although Merman was raised in a solidly middle-class home and although she became extremely wealthy as a performer, a presumption of her averageness concerning class serves at once to render her publicly accessible and to make her rise to stardom seem extraordinary, deserved, and also possible for others."⁴⁵² Thus, when Merman belted out in portrayals of strong women from the working class and spoke up off-stage whenever she felt the need to do so, she represented the self-confident working-class girl in the aftermath of the 19th Amendment, despite her middle-class origins.

According to Wolf, "Merman's self-disclosures upset the norms of femininity, which are tied to expectations of white, Christian, mid-

⁴⁴⁸ "History of the Musical Stage – The 1930s," accessed October 28, 2019. <http://www.musicals101.com/1930bway.htm>.

⁴⁴⁹ Merman and Eells, *Merman*. 7.

⁴⁵⁰ Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria – Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical*. 97.

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid.* 98.

⁴⁵² *Ibid.* 100.

dle-class propriety,⁴⁵³ and so, for over more than 30 years, did her roles: The temperamental nightclub singer Reno Sweeney in *Anything Goes*, May Daly in *DuBarry Was a Lady*, the “brassy Canal Zone bar owner”⁴⁵⁴ Hattie Maloney in *Panama Hattie*, the stage mother Rose in *Gypsy*, and the uneducated sharpshooter Annie Oakley in *Annie Get Your Gun* are all characters originating in the lower class. In contrast, Merman won her first Tony for portraying Mrs. Sally Adams in Irving Berlin’s *Call Me Madam* in 1951. Still the wisecracking dame, her part as the U.S. ambassador in Lichtenburg was not the kind of working-class character she had played before. Nevertheless, it worked because Merman’s actor’s personage and her roles, including this one, generally represented the simple girl who had *made* it. She was living proof that stardom was possible without middle- and upper-class privileges and language. Privately, she was the very example of an independent woman and lived a very self-reliant life. She could buy apartments, due to her stardom, and declared overtly that she had no housewife qualities and was unable to cook anything other than tea.⁴⁵⁵ Professionally, composers like Cole Porter created characters exclusively for her and she could exploit all the possibilities her vocal talent offered her.

This was exactly the kind of life that women of the postwar generation fought for during the second wave of feminism. In this period, Betty Friedan’s book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) is widely considered to have helped “spark widespread public activism for gender equality.”⁴⁵⁶ According to Debra Michals, “The book helped transform public awareness and brought many women into the vanguard of the women’s movement, just as it propelled Friedan into its early leadership.”⁴⁵⁷ Obviously, Merman lived her life ahead of the times. Nevertheless, when she married Robert Six, she briefly considered the idea of fulfilling the cliché of a married woman, and temporarily left show business.⁴⁵⁸ However, she

⁴⁵³ Ibid. 101.

⁴⁵⁴ John Kenrick, “History of the Musical Stage – The 1940s,” accessed October 28, 2019. <http://www.musicals101.com/1940bway.htm>.

⁴⁵⁵ Kellow, *Ethel Merman: A Life*. 33.

⁴⁵⁶ Debra Michals, “Betty Friedan,” accessed March 31, 2020. <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/betty-friedan>.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁸ Kellow, *Ethel Merman: A Life*. 160.

soon recognized, declares her biographer Brian Kellow, that her husband was less interested in her as his wife as he was in himself being the husband of the Broadway star Ethel Merman.⁴⁵⁹ After this experience and her third divorce, she tried married life a fourth time in 1964, but only for 38 days.⁴⁶⁰ When she explains in her memoirs her “only defense”⁴⁶¹ for marrying Ernest Borgnine as probably being “temporary insanity,”⁴⁶² she recovers her place as a woman speaking up for herself. After lapsing into the female cliché of that era, she quickly returned to her Broadway star image. With her portrayal of Rose in *Gypsy* in 1959, Merman’s actor’s personage became the link between Broadway musical theatre, with her as the Broadway Belt as its leading lady during the first half of the 20th century, and feminism of the 1960s. In Merman’s most successful years, the fight of the second wave of feminism to end discrimination against women was still far away, but Merman’s public appearance, the way she portrayed her feminist roles, and her crucial position as a Broadway diva had a cultural impact that could be assumed to have been part of a rising feminist consciousness in U.S. society.

When it comes to speaking up and belting out, Merman has a clear successor: Patti LuPone. Like Merman, LuPone does not hesitate to speak up when she’s angry, unsatisfied, or deceived. Contrary to Merman, however, LuPone also takes strong political positions, fighting against social injustice or even just for more respect as an actress. For example, after the episode in which she reached down from the stage during a scene of *Shows for Days* to take a texting audience member’s mobile phone, she was still furious two days after the incident and thought about leaving live theatre.⁴⁶³ In 2009, she stopped a performance of *Gypsy* to yell at a photographer,⁴⁶⁴ and in 2017 she explained in a red-carpet interview why she would not perform if President Trump

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁰ Merman and Eells, *Merman*. 232.

⁴⁶¹ Ethel Merman cit. in Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria – Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical*. 98.

⁴⁶² Ibid.

⁴⁶³ Todd Leopold, “Broadway legend Grabs Phone from Texter, Laments Future,” *Cable News Network*, no. July 9 (2015), <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/07/09/entertainment/feat-patti-lupone-cell-phone/index.html>.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid.

visited *War Paint*, the Broadway show she was in at this time.⁴⁶⁵ Freeman wrote in 2018 that, with this comment, she “gained an extra level of fame … for her political opinions.”⁴⁶⁶ Like Merman, LuPone does not always take care of her language in such moments. Freeman even finds it “hard to imagine LuPone ever worrying too much about appropriateness.”⁴⁶⁷ However, socially appropriate or not, she stands up for herself as an actress and as a feminist without compromise.

In contrast, it is hard to picture Angela Lansbury ever losing control in public. After some years as an attractive young character actress in the movies, she turned to the Broadway musical to become one of the most recognized female Broadway musical leading ladies of the 20th century. On the one hand a Broadway star, she often underlines how much she loves doing housework, cooking, and gardening on the other hand.⁴⁶⁸ Lansbury says that “the trick is to have a career and also be able to think about those things as well.”⁴⁶⁹ Publishing a Fitness Video in 1988 called *Angela Lansbury's Positive Moves: A Personal Plan for Fitness and Well-Being at Any Age*, a 63-year-old Lansbury emphasized the importance of attractiveness for women older than those targeted in the media.⁴⁷⁰ At a time when the second wave of feminism was considered to be over, her position was a counterpoint to Jane Fonda's Fitness Videos about youth, beauty, and the perfect body, and sent a strong feminist message. Nevertheless, Lansbury's feminism always has gone hand in hand with *femininity*, in favor of taking care of “how you look to yourself in the mirror and to your husband.”⁴⁷¹ She even advocates plastic surgery, stating “if you need it, have it.”⁴⁷²

⁴⁶⁵ Freeman, “Print that!” Broadway Legend Patti LuPone Sounds Off”.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁸ For example, see Gottfried, *Balancing Act – The Authorized Biography of Angela Lansbury*. 214, 312.

⁴⁶⁹ Angela Lansbury cit. in ibid. 316.

⁴⁷⁰ Tom Spain, “Fitness, She Filmed,” *The Washington Post*, no. July 7 (1988), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1988/07/07/fitness-she-filmed/bbf5b091-23e8-442a-99a8-70e267dd3e82/>.

⁴⁷¹ Angela Lansbury cit. in Suzanne Adelson, “Angela Lansbury Has a Message for Older Women: Fitness, She Says,” *People*, no. November 7 (1988), <https://people.com/archive/angela-lansbury-has-a-message-for-older-women-fitness-she-says-vol-30-no-19/>.

⁴⁷² Ibid.

Although she describes herself as “a strong supporter of women’s rights,”⁴⁷³ she was harshly condemned about her position criticizing the #MeToo movement, which called out sexual harassment and abuse.⁴⁷⁴ By saying that “making themselves attractive” had ‘backfired’ for women and they must ‘sometimes take blame,’⁴⁷⁵ she put herself publicly in an (arguably) anti-feminist position. Blaming her words being taken out of context, she added afterward that “there is no excuse whatsoever for men to harass women in an abusive sexual manner.”⁴⁷⁶ Also, she is cited saying, “It’s awful to say we can’t make ourselves look as attractive as possible without being knocked down or raped.”⁴⁷⁷ Nevertheless, claiming that she was “accused of having balls,”⁴⁷⁸ she puts herself on the same bold page as Merman and LuPone when she declares that strong women should be the norm.⁴⁷⁹

LuPone played Merman’s most successful roles, except “Annie” in *Annie Get Your Gun*. This part was taken over by Bernadette Peters in 1999. Peters, LuPone, and Lansbury played variously the same roles in different productions, especially in Sondheim musicals, portraying his “new female prototype”⁴⁸⁰ and his “variety of independent women,”⁴⁸¹ and all three succeeded as Rose in different revivals of *Gypsy* between 1974 to 2009.

As mentioned before, Peters and LuPone won their first Tonys in Andrew Lloyd Webber musicals, *Evita* (LuPone) and *Song and Dance* (Peters), portraying in both cases strong female characters. These characters have something in common: While the character of Eva Perón fulfills (at the beginning of the musical) the cliché of a young woman using her body to climb the social ladder, she takes a strong feminist

⁴⁷³ Angela Lansbury cit. in BBC Entertainment News, “Dame Angela Lansbury Says Sexual Harassment Comments Taken Out of Context,” British Broadcasting Corporation, accessed October 31, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-42179153>.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁸ Angela Lansbury cit. in Gottfried, *Balancing Act – The Authorized Biography of Angela Lansbury*, 310.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁰ Winer, “Why Sondheim’s Women Are Different.”

⁴⁸¹ Ibid.

position just before dying. Emma in *Song and Dance* is at first fragile, cute, and naïve, but finally starts a new life as a strong and independent woman. Both characters demonstrate few feminist attributes at the beginning but develop into strong characters, supporting a crucial feminist message: A woman standing up for herself, stands up for all women.

Even in musicals from the previous era, female characters sometimes express messages of empowerment, even if these are not always clearly intentional and maybe diluted by stereotypes of the time. When Carol Channing portrayed Lorelei Lee in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* in 1946, it is unlikely she had feminist thoughts about it at first. The role of a woman searching for a rich husband does not correspond to feminist ideals. However, when the character impresses her potential future father-in-law with knowledge about his business, she turns out to be more of a capable woman and not the gold-digger she at first appeared to be. According to the musical's synopsis – and contrary to the movie with Marilyn Monroe – “Eventually Lorelei succeeds in getting her tiara and her Gus – and arranges a merger between the button business and the zipper business that looks like bringing lots of success (and lots more diamonds) in the future.”⁴⁸² Even though Lorelei’s main interest remains diamonds, the musical’s ending presents her as a woman *doing* something to get even more of these stones by arranging a merger, thus (arguably), she becomes a kind of an unconventional businesswoman, actively taking her life in her hands. By doing so, the character sends the stirrings of a feminist message.

Channing’s second big character in her career, the matchmaker Dolly, is also a businesswoman and chasing to get herself married. Here, the character Dolly first shows no feminist attributes and even goes as far as “speaking” to her late husband, Ephram, asking for a sign that it would be okay to remarry with Horace Vandergelder.⁴⁸³ She more or less asks for permission. While Dolly pulls the strings to get married to Vandergelder (who will be delighted when she catches him), she

⁴⁸² The Guide to Musical Theatre, “Gentlemen Prefer Blondes,” accessed May 13, 2020. http://www.guidetomusicaltheatre.com/shows_g/gentlemen_prefer Blondes.htm.

⁴⁸³ “Hello Dolly!,” The Guide to Musical Theatre, accessed May 13, 2020. http://www.guidetomusicaltheatre.com/shows_h/hello_dolly.htm.

succeeds along the way to arrange three other marriages.⁴⁸⁴ However, since she will not get paid for her services as a matchmaker, she is even not yet a successful businesswoman. Only at the end, giving the wink to the audience, does she hint that Vandergelder's fortune will soon be put to good use,⁴⁸⁵ "encouraging young things to grow,"⁴⁸⁶ thus admitting her objective is to take control over his money as soon as they are married. Dolly is not really a feminist role, but she is a woman actively pursuing her goal (even though this is returning into the traditional setting of a marriage). Additionally, the fact that she indicates that she will take over her husband's financial decisions in the future, gives the character a feminist touch, especially since the story takes place in the 1890s. Dolly demonstrates that traditions in the social order can be turned around to benefit a woman's position by taking a certain amount of power, but without officially changing the code of conduct – at least not immediately. This role fitted Channing perfectly and showed parallels to her personal life.

Channing also stuck to the traditional conventions of marriage – but in an idiosyncratic way: After two shorter marriages of five and six years, she remained married for 42 years to her manager, Charles Lowe, until his death at age 87 in 1999.⁴⁸⁷ However, it was not death that did part Lowe and Channing; according to David Richards, just a year before his death, Channing claimed that Lowe was "a control freak who bruised her regularly, squandered her considerable earnings and had sex with her only twice in more than four decades of conjugal life."⁴⁸⁸ After remaining married for such a long time, she filed for divorce, this time at 78 years old, and spoke out about her reasons in an interview with the Washington Post: "The whole thing about control freak victims is that they don't know they are. It's taken me 77 years to figure that out. I was miserable. I was unhappy. And I didn't realize it wasn't

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁷ The Broadway League, "Carol Channing".

⁴⁸⁸ David Richards, "Carol Channing, Unhappily Ever After End To 41-Year Marriage Stuns Friends," *The Washington Post*, no. May 22 (1998), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1998/05/22/carol-channing-unhappily-ever-after-end-to-41-year-marriage-stuns-friends/787396bc-aoba-4592-ad98-9cead3620072/>.

my fault. But I'm going to survive. I'm going to live. I'm free.”⁴⁸⁹ At age 78, Channing now started to take feminist positions, speaking up publicly against marital abuse. She explained that she decided to speak up “so that young women with their lives before them could benefit from her experience.”⁴⁹⁰ Channing’s feminist actor’s personage had matured. Finally, like the characters Lorelei and Dolly, Channing married the man *she* decided upon, her high school sweetheart, Harry Kullijian, in 2003 at age 82.⁴⁹¹ Thirteen years later, at age 95, asked if she considered herself as a feminist, she answered, “I guess it depends on your personal definition of the word. I was told that I was a feminist when I spoke out to help others. So if you subscribe to that interpretation, then yes, I suppose I am.”⁴⁹² As such, she was an early activist for AIDS awareness and an active supporter of the Actors Fund,⁴⁹³ and, furthermore, took a true feminist position in the media. For example, she would give a comic feminist tirade when explaining to children that no one loves housework and that women pretending to like it in commercials are actresses who get paid to say so.⁴⁹⁴ According to Amber Frost, Channing participated in the 1972 album and book *Free to Be ... You and Me*, produced by Marlo Thomas and the Ms. Foundation for Women, to give children “some gender-neutral, identity-affirming entertainment,”⁴⁹⁵ and she certainly did. Frost calls the project “second-wave feminist consciousness-raising at its simplest, and at its finest.”⁴⁹⁶

The second wave of feminism had as its focus to change the way society thought about women. Channing’s more traditional approach to feminism certainly helped to provide a counterpoint to public voices

⁴⁸⁹ Carol Channing cit. in *ibid*.

⁴⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹¹ Suzanne Raga, “12 Larger-Than-Life Facts About Carol Channing,” *Mental Floss Entertainment*, no. January 15 (2019), <http://mentalfloss.com/article/74540/12-facts-about-carol-channing-her-95th-birthday>.

⁴⁹² Carol Channing, interview by Molly Simms, 2016. <https://bust.com/entertainment/18458-carol-channing-interview.html>.

⁴⁹³ Wiegand, “Carol Channing, Star of Hello, Dolly! On Broadway, Dies Aged 97”.

⁴⁹⁴ Housework, posted by “Krista Walsh,” December 18, 2011. (YouTube: Google LLC), 2:59, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iY7dJrGnEYI>.

⁴⁹⁵ Amber Frost, “Carol Channing Delivers A Beautiful Feminist Tirade Against Housework (You Know, For The Kids),” accessed October 2019, 2019, https://dangerousminds.net/comments/carol_channing_delivers_a_beautiful_feminist_tirade_against_housework.

⁴⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

who defined feminists as angry and man-hating, especially with the beginning of the Reagan era and the conservatism of the 1980s,⁴⁹⁷ a time when the image of feminists came under attack, its proponents being portrayed as “humorless, hairy-legged shrews.”⁴⁹⁸

However, Channing’s appearance was ahead of her time. Her look definitively resembled more that of the young women of the third wave of feminism in the 1990s than that of a “man-hating second-waver.” According to Bridget J. Crawford, “Third wave feminists embraced the ‘fun,’ ‘sexy’ and ‘girly,’ rejecting the (supposedly) strident, humorless feminism of the 1970s and 1980s while taking up the feminist mantle.”⁴⁹⁹ Despite her age, Channing fitted perfectly into that picture of third-wave feminists. Frost asserts that “gender is something that you can navigate and mold to your liking – to put it in terms a child could understand, gender should be *fun*. And *no one* has more fun being a girl than the great Carol Channing.”⁵⁰⁰ Posting this comment in November 2013, two months before Channing turned 93, Frost confirms that Channing’s 1972 feminist activities still have an impact.

Only thirteen years younger than Merman, Channing brought a notably different aspect to the Broadway Belt and feminism. While Merman had the exceptional voice that allowed her to portray strong women and, supported by that, lived the life of a self-determined woman offstage, as well, Channing’s roles and her self-portrayal created her life-long feminine image, one which can only be interpreted as feminist once Channing reached a certain age. When she duets “Blondes Aren’t Necessarily Dumb”⁵⁰¹ with Goldie Hawn on *Rowan & Martin’s Laugh-In*, the 1969 television variety show, she presents a humorous

⁴⁹⁷ Lynn Phillips, *Flirting with Danger – Young Women’s Reflections on Sexuality and Domination* (New York: New York University Press, 2000). 10.

⁴⁹⁸ Georgina Diaz, “Has Today’s Feminism Gone Too Far?,” *Girls’ Globe*, no. August 5 (2019), <https://www.girlsglobe.org/2019/08/05/todays-feminism-gone-too-far/>.

⁴⁹⁹ Bridget J. Crawford, “Third-Wave Feminism, Motherhood and the Future of Legal Theory,” in *Gender, Sexualities and Law*, ed. Jackie Jones, et al. (New York: Routledge, 2011). 227.

⁵⁰⁰ Frost, “Carol Channing Delivers A Beautiful Feminist Tirade Against Housework (You Know, For The Kids)”

⁵⁰¹ Carol and Goldie Sing About Blondes – Rowan & Martin’s Laugh-In – George Schlatter, posted by “Rowan & Martin’s Laugh-In,” November 13, 2017. (YouTube: Google LLC), 3:01, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5_91Cs2Z--w.

statement about her girliness without any overt sign of criticism. However, knowing that Channing's participation in "Free to Be ... You and Me" happened only three years later, I suggest looking at this duet more ironically: Knowing that Channing was an outspoken liberal Democrat and her name included in Richard Nixon's so-called "enemies list"⁵⁰² (something she is said to be "very, very proud" of),⁵⁰³ this duet should not be taken by the word: Channing "played the game" of the 1969 social order appearing as supposed-to-be dumb blonde to reinforce her career, probably hoping to reach a public position to speak out and to be heard – which is something that really happened. If Channing would have spoken out earlier than 1998/99 about her marriage being abusive, she might not have been heard. Being *not* "necessarily dumb," Channing's actions – even though not always apparently feminist – can be understood as early advocating for third-wave feminism, like Merman's feminist actor's personage was ahead of the second wave.

Certainly, Channing's girlish feminism in her comedy acts has *not* the political and social weight of the Anita Hill case, which became 22 years after this television variety show the symbol of the beginning third-wave feminism in 1991. Hill "accused Justice Thomas of sexual harassment and prompted an extraordinary Senate hearing."⁵⁰⁴ Nevertheless, in her way, Channing took an active part in a revitalized feminism in U.S. society.

At the same time Channing slowly was beginning to speak out more and more noticeably, the next generation of Broadway belters began to portray feminist leading lady parts. Like Channing, Bernadette Peters plays the coquette with her looks. Watching her rendition of Sondheim's "Broadway Baby," at her concert at Royal Festival Hall London,⁵⁰⁵ she can be perceived as flirting and coqueting with the audience, playing

⁵⁰² Gil Troy, "Why Carol Channing Ended Up On Richard Nixon's 'Enemies List,'" *The Daily Beast*, no. April 16 (2017), <https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-carol-channing-ended-up-on-richard-nixons-enemies-list>.

⁵⁰³ Harris, "Memories of Carol Channing for Whom Going On Was a Must".

⁵⁰⁴ Deborah Sontag, "Anita Hill and Revitalizing Feminism," *The New York Times*, no. April 26 (1992): <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/04/26/nyregion/anita-hill-and-revitalizing-feminism.html>.

⁵⁰⁵ Broadway Baby by Bernadette Peters, posted by "Eric Martin," February 8, 2008. (YouTube: Google LLC), 4:33, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7gl4onIfA_I&list=PLBD2B8o85A77BFEDC.

sexy and girly, wearing a tight-fitting dress with a low-cut décolleté. Also, critics have always emphasized her sex appeal; Victoria Myers even called her “young and cute forever” when the performer turned seventy in 2018.⁵⁰⁶ Citing different writers from *The New York Times*, Myers describes Peters invariably being perceived as “adorable,” her shape “voluptuous,” and cute like a “kewpie doll.”⁵⁰⁷ In contrast, Peters comments that she always had “this thing in her mind – when you’re a woman and you’re a success, you’re a ball breaker,”⁵⁰⁸ you’re terrible. I guess I sold myself this bill of goods, but I’m changing. It’s OK for a woman to be aggressive and successful.”⁵⁰⁹ Nevertheless, I found no comments in any interview or article describing her as in any way aggressive, not even once. Peters is always characterized as “a very particular type in her warmth, humor, and vulnerability.”⁵¹⁰ A Tony nominee for her role as Dot in the Pulitzer-Prize-winning Broadway musical *Sunday in the Park with George*, she was contradictorily described as a “sexy siren”⁵¹¹ while also as “a child who painted herself up in front of mommy’s makeup mirror.”⁵¹² Frank Rich called her “radiant” and “wonderful.”⁵¹³ Due to her highly recognized interpretations of Sondheim’s work,⁵¹⁴ superficial descriptions of her appearance are only attachments to her artistic achievement, of course. “There is nothing I can do, reading about it, about what people’s perceptions are. There are other things about me besides looking kewpie dollish. I’d like people to see me as a woman now, but it depends on the role you’re playing.”⁵¹⁵

⁵⁰⁶ Myers, “Bernadette Peters: Young and Cute, Forever and Never”.

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁸ Peters uses here the slang expression “ball-breaker” in the sense of “a woman whose character and behavior may be regarded as threatening a man’s sense of power.” See Collins Dictionary. 2019, s.v. “ball breaker.” <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/de/worterbuch/englisch/ballbreaker>.

⁵⁰⁹ Bernadette Peters cit. in Myers, “Bernadette Peters: Young and Cute, Forever and Never”.

⁵¹⁰ David Marchese, “In Conversation: Bernadette Peters,” *Vulture*, no., <https://www.vulture.com/2018/02/bernadette-peters-in-conversation.html>.

⁵¹¹ Myers, “Bernadette Peters: Young and Cute, Forever and Never”.

⁵¹² Ibid.

⁵¹³ Ibid.

⁵¹⁴ Ibid.

⁵¹⁵ Bernadette Peters cit. in Crews, “Broadway’s Bernadette Peters: Viva the Diva, Her Fans Say”.

Integrating Sondheim's redefinition of "musical's feminine ideals" into the interpretation of the characters she portrays, turns Peters into a sort of *on-stage feminist*, especially due to her belt voice, as was the case for Merman. Contrary to Merman, however, Peters portrays women who are strong (or getting stronger) showing their vulnerable side they must vanquish to reach their goals. Peters – and her characters – remain feminine while getting stronger, which corresponds to the attitude of most feminists of the third wave. For example, Peters portrayed Annie Oakley, one of Merman's biggest roles, in the revival of *Annie Get Your Gun* in 1999, but she distances herself from Merman's performance. Peters describes her own portrayal of Annie as a "slightly dim backwoods girl who speaks in a girlish, molasses-thick Southern drawl."⁵¹⁶ According to Charles Isherwood, she delivered "an intensely felt, personalized interpretation."⁵¹⁷ In contrast, Merman was "deadly with a rifle over her shoulder" and could "scream out the air of song so that the building trembles,"⁵¹⁸ writes Nichols. Interestingly, Merman originated the tougher version of the young sharpshooter Annie at age 38 and re-appeared in the role at age 58 in the revival of 1966, whereas Peters was 51 years old when she portrayed the role in the 1999 revival for the first time.⁵¹⁹ As with Channing, the appearance of girlishness, on- and offstage, cannot simply be a question of age. Replacing Bette Midler, whose actor's personage resembles more Merman than Channing, Peters portrayed Dolly in 2018 at age 70, and her coquettishness is welcomed by the audience and critics. As Marilyn Stasio comments, Peters "puts the 'doll' back in *Hello, Dolly!*" with a "terrific voice," and "charms people into doing what she wants."⁵²⁰ Peters dollish portrayal was more the successor of Channing's in style (although with more of a

⁵¹⁶ Charles Isherwood, "Annie Get Your Gun," *Variety – The Business of Entertainment*, no. March 4 (1999), <https://variety.com/1999/legit/reviews/annie-get-your-gun-4-1200457085/>.

⁵¹⁷ Ibid.

⁵¹⁸ Lewis Nichols cit. in Brantley, *Broadway Musicals – From the Pages of The New York Times*. 112.

⁵¹⁹ See "Bernadette Peters" and "Ethel Merman" in <http://www.ibdb.com>.

⁵²⁰ Marilyn Stasio, "Broadway Review: 'Bernadette Peters in 'Hello, Dolly!,'" *Variety*, no. February 22 (2018), <https://variety.com/2018/legit/reviews/hello-dolly-review-bernadette-peters-1202707835/>.

belt voice than Channing), while Midler can be perceived as following in the footsteps of Merman.

As mentioned, Merman had turned down to originate Dolly in 1964,⁵²¹ even though it was originally written for her, but she portrayed Dolly on Broadway in 1970 (at age 62) as a short replacement at the end of her career. It was Channing who created the character for the musical's premiere, fulfilling the creative team's most important request: "the energy a performer was able to pour into the audience."⁵²² According to Wolf, "Channing won the role through her quirky presence and strong physicality, what Herman appreciated as her 'larger-than-life, almost Cartoon-like quality'."⁵²³ Channing portrayed Dolly on Broadway non-stop from 1964 to 1970, again in 1978, and from 1995 to 1996. She originated the part at age 43 and revived it at age 57 and 74 – even older than Midler and Peters when she appeared in this part for the last time. A more conventional feminist role, the part of Dolly is timeless and can be revived at any age, from about 40 years and upwards. "*Hello, Dolly!* says that a loud, middle-aged lady can get the man she wants," states Sondheim.⁵²⁴ It is true that the most celebrated female leading roles like Dolly, Rose, Mrs. Lovett, and others created up through the 1980s are roles for middle-aged belters, not the younger generation which features in *Wicked* or *Les Mis*. Acknowledging the age gap, it can be pointed out that these middle-aged leading ladies of Broadway and their roles not only survived second- and third-wave feminism but *continue* to have an impact as feminist elite Broadway belters portraying strong Broadway diva roles. While this fact may well guarantee the continuing existence of the feminist Broadway Belt in Broadway musical theatre (at least in revivals), it is necessary to examine her generally diminished position due to the drastically changed aesthetics brought about by megamusicals.

In her book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, journalist Susan Faludi called the 1980s "a decade of a backlash against

⁵²¹ Wolf, *Changed for Good – A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*. Pos. 1608.

⁵²² Gower Champion cit. in ibid. 1611.

⁵²³ Jerry Herman cit. in ibid.

⁵²⁴ Darcie Denkert, *A Fine Romance – Hollywood and Broadway -- The Magic – The Mayhem – The Musicals* (New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, 2005). 140.

feminism.”⁵²⁵ According to Wolf, in 1986, “*Newsweek* warned that single, college-educated women over forty were more likely to be killed by terrorists than to marry.”⁵²⁶ Feminism was declared “over” and *the New York Times Magazine* used the term *postfeminist generation* in 1982 in an interview with young women who believed it was possible to reach absolute gender equality simply by being strong individuals.⁵²⁷ On Broadway, the musical theatre’s new subgenre, the megamusical, began to “shrink women’s importance on stage.”⁵²⁸ As Wolf states:

Nothing changed from one performance to the next and the same show could be played by different actors in different cities at the same time. Because the whole show was musically scored, the action moved at a prescribed pace, ensuring no variation among actor’s performances and promising spectators the same show anywhere and at any time.⁵²⁹

Imaging *Hello, Dolly!* or *Gypsy* as megamusicals, every actress portraying Dolly or Rose would have to be about the same age and their interpretation, movements, and the timings of their songs would have to be nearly identical. Costumes and scenery would remain constant for the show’s multiple-year-long running period from the premiere on, and Dollys and Roses probably would each sound very similar to each other, due to advanced sound technique. (As Wolf observes, “even actors with quiet voices could be stars on the megamusicals stage.”⁵³⁰) In this case, Broadway musical theatre would not have such a range of idiosyncratic elite Broadway belters and the diversity of the interpretation of their feminist messages would be lost. Uniformity diminishes or even destroys feminist messages: In megamusicals of the 1980s, feminist roles are nonexistent or very small, and male characters dominate, for example in *Les Misérables*. The impact feminist roles and

⁵²⁵ Susan Faludi cit. in Wolf, *Changed for Good – A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*. Pos. 2674.

⁵²⁶ Ibid. Pos. 2686.

⁵²⁷ Ibid. Pos. 2663.

⁵²⁸ Ibid. Pos. 2630.

⁵²⁹ Ibid. Pos. 2762.

⁵³⁰ Ibid. 2873.

feminist Broadway belters in Broadway musical theatre had before the 1980s reached its lowest point when, in 1985, the categories of Best Actress, and even Best Actor and Best Choreography in a Musical were skipped at the annual Tony Awards.⁵³¹ Although *Les Misérables* won eight Tonys in 1987, as well as the New York Drama Critics Award for Best Musical and five Drama Desk Awards, no Tony for Best Actor or Best Actress was awarded. In fact, on the female side, there are only featured actresses in the show, no leading lady, and Fantine and Eponine each have a dramatically crucial belt song – although neither forwards a feminist message. The more or less anonymous stars in megamusicals continue to make a lot of money for the investors, but they rarely have an impact on gender and social order. Feminism needs the voice of a Broadway diva in a feminist diva role.

Luckily, diva roles in revivals and a few new parts for a Broadway Belt continue to be portrayed by elite Broadway belters, sending a strong feminist message for the last few decades. For example, after LuPone in *Evita* (1980), Jennifer Holliday in *Dreamgirls* (1982), Chita Rivera in *The Rink* (1984), and Bernadette Peters in *Song and Dance* (1986) were honored with Tonys for Best Actress in a Leading Role in a Musical, subsequent winners in revivals have included Tyne Daly in *Gypsy* (winning in 1990), Bebe Neuwirth in *Chicago* (1997), Natasha Richardson in *Cabaret* (1998), and Bernadette Peters in *Annie Get Your Gun* (1999). Neither a so-called post-feminism nor the diffuse third wave of feminism promoting sexiness and girlishness while fighting against sexual abuse could destroy active feminism on the Broadway stage in feminist parts. Even though the impact of elite Broadway belters shrunk, it did not die.

At the beginning of the new millennium, feminist characters for Broadway belters slowly began to reappear in new musicals but the Broadway Belt and her feminist roles are rarely middle-aged women. Young women and even little girls dominate new musicals about strong-willed, independent female characters, as five-year-old Matilda, twelve-year-old Tomika, and ten-year-old Katie.⁵³² Indeed, Tony winners like

531 Maslon, *Broadway – The American Musical*. 376.

532 Matilda is the lead character of *Matilda the Musical*, and Tomika and Katie are characters in *School of Rock the Musical*.

Heather Headly in *Aida* (2000), Marissa Jaret Winokur in *Hairspray* (2003), Idina Menzel in *Wicked* (2004), LaChanze in *The Color Purple* (2006), Alice Ripley in *Next to Normal* (2009), Stephanie J. Block in *The Cher Show* (2019), and winners in Broadway musical revivals like Christine Ebersole in *42nd Street* (2001), Sutton Foster in *Thoroughly Modern Millie* (2002), Patti LuPone in *Gypsy* (2008), Catherine Zeta-Jones in *A Little Night Music* (2010), Sutton Foster in *Anything Goes* (2011) and Cynthia Erivo in *The Color Purple* (2016), demonstrate the unbroken importance of the Broadway Belt and the feminist character in Broadway musical theatre. However, there are still not enough new diva roles for the Broadway Belt to recover her legacy.

Since 2017, with the rise of #MeToo and #TimesUp, the beginning of the fourth wave of feminism has been announced,⁵³³ and this development concerns the Broadway Belt as much as Broadway musical theatre in general. Today's new feminist Broadway musicals would need more than a feminist Broadway diva: "First, there must be at least as many women as men in the cast. Second, the show must lend itself to inclusive, diverse casting. Finally, the show must empower women,"⁵³⁴ emphasizes Kelly Wallace. This is a big goal to achieve. As Harmony France, the artistic director of the *first equity, feminist musical theatre company* in Chicago explains, "There's no one way to define what empowers women. We're still stuck in a man's idea of escapism, with too few exceptions. Women end up playing the virgin, the whore, or the hag. Those are the options."⁵³⁵ Fortunately, younger productions like *9 to 5* or *Waitress* are shows able to combine entertainment and a feminist message for the audience. "If they come for a great show, they'll leave with a little piece of activism. And if they come for the activism, they'll leave having seen a great show. Whatever they come for we are going to do both,"⁵³⁶ confirms France. Although feminism is slowly moving forward in Broadway musical theatre as in U.S. society, the Broadway

⁵³³ Elasaid Munro, "Feminism: A Fourth Wave?," accessed September 5, 2020. <https://www.psa.ac.uk/psa/news/feminism-fourth-wave>.

⁵³⁴ Kelly Wallace, "What Makes Musical Theatre Feminist?," *Playbill*, no. March 8 (2017), <https://www.playbill.com/article/what-makes-musical-theatre-feminist>.

⁵³⁵ Harmony France cit. in *ibid*.

⁵³⁶ *Ibid*.

musical of the 21st century needs a greater variety of female characters. Even though, according to Dean Adams (referring to the character Ula in the 2001 musical *The Producers*), the two-dimensional “blond bombshell” type evolved [from the original movie] to a more complete character in the musical version,”⁵³⁷ she still remains blond and pretty, with long legs. Ryan Donovan adds, “If an actor’s body does not align with the ‘ideal’ type of a leading lady (pretty thin, white, and young) it becomes measurably more difficult to land a break-through role and even harder to sustain a career on Broadway as a leading lady. In fact, it is nearly unachievable.”⁵³⁸

Reflecting these words especially in the context of the Broadway Belt, it is a matter of fact that the elite Broadway Belt is primarily a white female musical performer. African-American elite Broadway belters generally portray African-American characters; exceptions prove the rule. Even if the number of multiracial casts is growing, only a few African-American belters are successfully portraying a character of any other ethnicity on Broadway, for example Renée Elise Goldsberry, who won in 2016 the Tony for Best Featured Actress in *Hamilton*. However, the feminist message is slight. In this male-dominated musical, Goldsberry plays the sister-in-law of Alexander Hamilton, Angelica Schuyler, supporting him in most of his actions because she loves him secretly. Hamilton’s wife, Eliza, finds herself disgraced due to his cheating on her with a married woman, one who was abused by her husband. The third of the Schyler sisters is such an insignificant part of the story that she disappears after the first act. The only brief feminist aspect is Eliza’s foundation of an orphanage after Hamilton’s death. True, the story takes place in the 18th century, but the musical is a creation of the present day. Although *Hamilton* premiered in 2015 on Broadway as the first musical with an explicitly multiracial casting, even for parts of historical figures who were white, it proves at the same time at which point feminism is still in its infancy, not to speak about multiracial feminist *leading* parts.

⁵³⁷ Dean Adams, “*The Producers* and *Hairspray*: The Hazards and Rewards of Recursive Adaptation,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Musical Theatre Screen Adaptations*, ed. Dominic McHugh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). 597.

⁵³⁸ Ryan Donovan, “Broadway Bodies: Casting, Stigma, and Difference in Broadway Musicals Since ‘A Chorus Line’ (1975)” (Dissertation, City University of New York, 2019). 58.

Broadway's feminist characters for African-American belters remain cliché roles, like Nabulungi in *The Book of Mormons* (2011), Deloris in *Sister Act* (2009), Celie in *The Color Purple* (2005 and 2015), and Caroline in *Caroline, or Change* (2004). In 2020, an African-American Broadway Belt portraying a character that is *not* explicitly created as an African-American character is still an exception, and Tony winners originating such a portrayal might be hard to find. Thus, the next chapter honors the African-American Broadway Belt and demonstrates the lack of opportunities and equal consideration for performers of color in Broadway musical theatre.

3.4.2 African-American Belters in Broadway Musical Theatre

The playing field for African-American Broadway musical performers has not changed with the times as much as one might expect. In 1947, John Lovell, Jr. wrote an article in the July issue of The NAACP's⁵³⁹ publication *The Crisis* about African Americans in American Theatre.⁵⁴⁰ In it, he lamented the severe limitations for African-American artists, "limitations that the theater in a democracy ought to be ashamed of."⁵⁴¹ Lovell describes African-American performers as determined to change Broadway theatre's future into something more "rainbowlike, more wonderful than any drama that has yet seen the boards."⁵⁴² However, after the events of #Oscarsowhite in 2016, Lovell's conclusive declaration about limitations appears still to be relevant; the rainbow vision has not yet been achieved.⁵⁴³

According to A.J. Muhammad from the *Jean Blackwell Hutson Research and Reference*, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the 2015–2016 Broadway season was "one of the most diverse on

⁵³⁹ NAACP stands for the *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People*, an African-American civil rights organization; <https://www.naacp.org>.

⁵⁴⁰ A.J. Muhammad, "African Americans on Broadway Then and Now," accessed November 12, 2019. <https://www.nypl.org/blog/2016/02/26/african-americans-broadway>.

⁵⁴¹ John Lovell Jr. cit. in *ibid*.

⁵⁴² *Ibid*.

⁵⁴³ *Ibid*.

record.”⁵⁴⁴ However, parity on stage did not yet hit the elite Broadway Belt very much – and American history demonstrates the origin of this problem. Although feminism and abolition worked hand in hand at the beginning of the first women’s movement in 1848, the right of African-American men to vote in 1870 divided women in the movement’s cause.⁵⁴⁵ A group of white women turned into racist suffragettes, furious about being positioned behind former slaves.⁵⁴⁶ Feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton “didn’t hesitate to voice her opinion that white women were superior to black men, and thus more deserving of the vote,”⁵⁴⁷ writes Jessie Daniels. A white woman wrote to Stanton and Anthony’s newspaper, asking: “If educated women are not as fit to decide who shall be the rulers of this country, as ‘field hands,’ then where’s the use of culture, or any brain at all?”⁵⁴⁸ Nearly 100 years later, the second wave of feminism in the 1960s cared about racism, but white women had different priorities, and African-American women had their own problems to fight for.⁵⁴⁹ This situation in American society was also reflected in Broadway musical theatre.

On Broadway in the 1920s, segregation was still alive, even though the success of *Shuffle Along* in 1921 established the *black musical*.⁵⁵⁰ However, in this era, these all-African-American show acts remained a Broadway musical category apart and only *Showboat* in 1927 presented African-American and white characters and choruses together on stage – albeit the latter still in separated groups. In 1947, *Finian’s Rainbow*

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁵ National Park Service – U.S. Department of the Interior, “Antislavery Connection,” National Park Service – U.S. Department of the Interior, accessed April 1, 2020. <https://www.nps.gov/wori/learn/historyculture/antislavery-connection.htm>.

⁵⁴⁶ Sharon Harley, “African American Women and the Nineteenth Amendment,” accessed April 1, 2020. <https://www.nps.gov/articles/african-american-women-and-the-nineteenth-amendment.htm>.

⁵⁴⁷ Jessie Daniels, “Trouble With White Feminism: Racial Origins of U.S. Feminism,” *Ferris State University News*, no. April (2015), <https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/question/2015/april.htm>.

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁹ For example, white women advocated for reproductive freedom, while African-American women fought to stop the forced sterilization of people of color and people with disabilities. See Jael Silliman et al., *Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organize for Reproductive Justice* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2004). 9–10.

⁵⁵⁰ Stempel, *Showtime – A History of the Broadway Musical Theater*. 235.

became the first Broadway musical that integrated African-American performers, at least in the chorus and supporting roles.⁵⁵¹ A subcategory of black musicals was the group of *white vehicles*, Broadway musicals with an originally white cast revived with an all-African-American cast, like *Carmen Jones* in 1944,⁵⁵² *Hello, Dolly!* in 1967, and *The Wiz* in 1975.⁵⁵³ However, turning a white musical into a black musical is not integration. Regarding the Broadway Belt, until today, an African-American leading lady in a Broadway musical theatre mainly portrays an African-American character in a cast that is generally all or mostly African American, as in *Dreamgirls*; *The Color Purple*; *Caroline, or Change*; and *Tina – The Tina Turner Musical*.

In 1950, Juanita Hall became the first African-American performer to win a Tony for Best Actress in a Featured Role, as Bloody Mary in Rodgers & Hammerstein's *South Pacific*.⁵⁵⁴ She was one of the figure-heads in this musical, which was (arguably) highly acclaimed for its "sensitive and courageous treatment of the subject of racial prejudice."⁵⁵⁵ However, Hall's character is not even African-American: Bloody Mary is a native, born on an exotic, paradisiacal island in the South Pacific that is neither African, nor American and, as Andrea Most remarks, appears "to emerge directly from World War II film stereotypes of grinning Chinese peasants with betel stained teeth."⁵⁵⁶ The character's position in *South Pacific* is also stereotypical: Contrary to *The Sound of Music*'s Mother Abbess, *South Pacific* has a "mother-pimp," writes Lawrence Downes in *The New York Times*.⁵⁵⁷ In his review of the 2008

⁵⁵¹ Thomas Hischak, *The Oxford Companion to the American Musical, Theatre, Film, and Television* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). 7.

⁵⁵² Based on Georges Bizet's French opera *Carmen*.

⁵⁵³ Hischak, *The Oxford Companion to the American Musical, Theatre, Film, and Television*. 8.

⁵⁵⁴ In fact, Juanita Hall was mixed race, with a African-American father and an Irish-American mother, but is generally denominated as the first African American to win a Tony Award.

⁵⁵⁵ Andrea Most, "'You 've Got to Be Carefully Taught': The Politics of Race in Rodgers and Hammerstein's 'South Pacific,'" *Theatre Journal – The Johns Hopkins University Press* 52, no. 3 (2000): www.jstor.org/stable/25068808. 307.

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid. 314.

⁵⁵⁷ Lawrence Downes, "Bloody Mary Is the Girl I Love," *The New York Times*, no. April 4 (2008), <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/04/opinion/04fri4.html>.

revival, Downes characterizes Bloody Mary as “a woman trapped – on a tiny island with no way out and no rescuers expected.”⁵⁵⁸ In his opinion, Bloody Mary delivers the show’s core message: “If you see something good in this ugly world – across a crowded room or in a hut on Bali Ha’i – seize it before it disappears.”⁵⁵⁹ Essentially describing Bloody Mary as little more than a native-born gold-digger, Downes adds his voice to those underlining the cliché nature of such roles.

It might be tempting to condemn such roles, but it is crucial to recognize that their creations brought recognition to many African-American musical performers at a time when Broadway and Hollywood were nearly a desert for any ethnicities other than white. Downes goes on to make the point that Rodgers and Hammerstein’s oeuvre was not just about tolerance, it was radical.⁵⁶⁰ According to Andrea Most, *South Pacific*’s radicalism lies in “its exposure of racial issues on the American stage,”⁵⁶¹ and Philip Beidler indicates that “the legend of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s use of the Broadway theatre to make a courageous statement against racial bigotry is the very foundation on which the work is considered a classic.”⁵⁶² However, *South Pacific* remains controversially discussed, especially for its stereotypes, and I agree with Most when she suggests that “*South Pacific*’s success actually lies not in its political radicalism but rather in its presentation of familiar racial tropes under a mask of comforting liberal rhetoric.”⁵⁶³

As much as *South Pacific* was considered revolutionary 70 years ago, the 20th- and 21st-century Broadway musical theatre has been lacking racial equity ever since. At first glance, today’s Broadway musical casts could be considered to be diverse, and today’s multiracial castings for musicals are supposed to be seen as progressive. However, the perception of this “progress” depends on one’s position. “I was the token

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁶¹ Most, “You ’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught’: The Politics of Race in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s ‘South Pacific.’” 311.

⁵⁶² Philip Beidler cit. in ibid. 312.

⁵⁶³ Ibid.

black girl in a lot of productions,”⁵⁶⁴ remembers Candice Marie Woods, who played Diana Ross in the 2018th Broadway production of *Ain’t Too Proud – the Life and Times of the Temptations*. “One of the good things was I got to learn to find my inner strength and own peace to be at a place where you feel different.”⁵⁶⁵ As the only African-American woman in her dance classes and various casts,⁵⁶⁶ she even goes as far as to say that “until *Ain’t Too Proud*, I have never been in a musical where the whole cast, bar one actor, is black. It has been wonderful.”⁵⁶⁷ Does this mean that Broadway musical theatre is slowly returning to being a segregated world – and African-American performers would welcome such a situation? Tony-nominated playwright Dominique Morisseau hopes this is not so. She posits that “Broadway is an old bastion of white, patriarchal supremacy … I think the entire culture is, so how is Broadway going to get away from where we are as a nation? It’s not. I think we have to push it.”⁵⁶⁸

African-American Broadway belters always pushed as much as they could. However, after Hall’s Tony as featured actress in 1950, it took twelve years before Diahann Carroll became the first African-American winner in a *lead* role, in Richard Rodgers’ *No Strings*.⁵⁶⁹ Carroll’s casting was socially progressive since it rendered the musical’s romance interracial. The story did not refer to ethnicity, which Rodgers thought was unnecessary, stating, “Rather than shrinking from the issue of race, such an approach would demonstrate our respect for the audience’s ability to accept our theme from rhetoric or sermons.”⁵⁷⁰ Although the issue of race was not made a theme, Carroll’s appearance as the first African-American musical performer in a part *not* explicitly written for an African-American actress is historically crucial. Despite her success, Carroll appeared only one more time on Broadway, 20 years after

⁵⁶⁴ Candice Marie Woods cit. in Teeman, “See Us, Trust Us, Employ Us: Broadway’s Women of Color on Confronting Racism – and Reshaping Theater”.

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁹ Tony Award * Productions, “Tony Award Winners”.

⁵⁷⁰ Richard Rodgers cit. in Geoffrey Holden Block, *Richard Rodgers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 208.

No Strings, in the play *Agnes of God* as the replacement for the white actress Elisabeth Ashley.⁵⁷¹ Although she had a remarkable career in films and television, she said in an interview in 2006 that she “would have loved more opportunity to do film.”⁵⁷² She added:

I’m so jealous that more often than not that kind of career is offered to white actresses... The world is not as aware as they have become now and probably will continue to become of the black American. So when one begins to put a project together, the first thought is, ‘What will it earn?’ and ‘What will it earn worldwide?’ And that’s why it’s important for us to keep pushing that door [open, so] the world knows more about African Americans.⁵⁷³

On Broadway, other African-American musical performers kept pushing. In 1968, Leslie Uggams followed in Carroll’s footsteps as an African-American Tony winner for Best Performance by an Actress in a Leading Role in a Musical, in *Hallelujah, Baby*. She portrayed Georgina, a young woman working as a maid who wants to become a star. This portrayal is not only the cliché of an African-American maid on a South Carolina estate, however; it is about the position of African-American women as a whole in U.S. society in the 1960s – and has a feminist message. It was the time of the second wave of feminism, but female African-American Broadway musical performers still had another battle to fight. One of the first African Americans to appear regularly on television (as a child star), Uggams remembers, that she “had to be careful what she did.”⁵⁷⁴ Even though, as early as 1939, Ethel Waters had been the first African American to achieve her own television program, Uggams recalls that, in the 1960s of her growing media presence, “I represented the whole

⁵⁷¹ The Broadway League, “Diahann Carroll,” accessed April 2, 2020. <https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-cast-staff/diahann-carroll-34679>.

⁵⁷² Ryan McPhee, “Tony Award Winner and Oscar Nominee Diahann Carroll Dies at 84,” *Playbill*, no. October 4 (2019), <http://www.playbill.com/article/tony-award-winner-and-oscar-nominee-diahann-carroll-dies-at-84>.

⁵⁷³ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁴ Henry Louis Gates Jr., “Leslie Uggams speaks of Fame and ‘Roots’ with Henry Louis Gates of ‘The Root,’” accessed November 14, 2019. http://leslieuggams.com/news/9/leslie_speaks_of_fame_and_roots_with_the_root.html.

‘Negro’ race – we were ‘Negroes’ back then.”⁵⁷⁵ At the time of the second wave of feminism, female African-Americans musical performers not only had to fight for gender equality but to get the same opportunities as white female musical performers – and little has changed today.

In 2018, the sisters Victoria Velazquez and Alexia Siel founded *Woman of Color on Broadway*, “in response to the lack of work opportunities in musical theatre for young women of color.”⁵⁷⁶ The initiative for female Broadway musical performers, composers, writers, producers, and so on of African, Latin, and Asian descent has the goal to present “networking and career opportunities to high school and college female students through special programming, mentoring with industry professionals, and internships with local and regional theater houses and production companies.”⁵⁷⁷ Although the 2019 Tony-winning production *Hadestown* is celebrated for the show’s artistic quality and its diverse cast, musicians, and stage crew, such a show still is an exception. The same year, Cynthia Meng, an Asian-American professional musician and music director who worked on *Hadestown*, went to an audition, where “everyone else was white and male.”⁵⁷⁸ Meng says she “had forgotten that this was the norm,” and “how much work still needs to be done.”⁵⁷⁹ Obviously, a lack of opportunities is not only an African-American issue, it is an issue of all ethnicities of color. For example, in 2019, Filipina Lea Salonga remains the *only* musical performer of Asian origins who has won a Tony Award for Best Performance by an Actress in a Leading Role in a Musical – for her portrayal of Kim, a Vietnamese cliché character, in *Miss Saigon* in 1991. Since then, there has been only one Tony-winning musical performer of Asian origin in a *featured* role – Korean-American Ruthie Anne Miles in the 2015 revival of *The King and I* – and no male musical performer of any Asian origins

⁵⁷⁵ Leslie Uggams cit. in *ibid.*

⁵⁷⁶ Velazquez and Sielo, “Women of Color on Broadway”.

⁵⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷⁸ Cynthia Meng cit. in Teeman, “See Us, Trust Us, Employ Us: Broadway’s Women of Color on Confronting Racism – and Reshaping Theater”.

⁵⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

has ever won a Tony.⁵⁸⁰ Thus I would argue that African-American feminism stands more broadly for feminism of women of color. While the women of #TimesUp fights for equal pay, women of color additionally must fight for equal rights compared to white women in every working environment, and so, too, on Broadway. As Velazquez states, “It’s a slow process, but hopefully we’ll get to a place where these casting choices are not a ‘first time’ and just unimportant and that women of color can just be cast as people, as any other actor.”⁵⁸¹

There have been many ‘first-time’ situations for African-American Broadway musical performers during the last sixty years. To name just a few, in 1967, Pearl Bailey starred with Cab Calloway in *Hello, Dolly!* as the leading lady of an entirely African-American cast and received a 1968 Special Tony Award.⁵⁸² In 1969, Melba Moore replaced Diane Keaton as Sheila in *Hair* and became the first African-American woman to portray Fantine in *Les Misérables* in 1995.⁵⁸³ For her portrayal of Effie White in *Dreamgirls* in 1982, Jennifer Holliday earned a Tony,⁵⁸⁴ a Grammy, a Drama Desk Award, and a Theater World Award.⁵⁸⁵ In 2002, Whoopi Goldberg was the first African-American woman with an Emmy, a Grammy, an Oscar, and a Tony Award, the so-called EGOT achievement.⁵⁸⁶ Audra McDonald achieved multiple “firsts” as an African-American: In 1996, she was the first Tony winner in both musical and play categories, winning her second Tony as featured actress in the play *Master Class* after her 1994 win for the musical *Carousel*. She

⁵⁸⁰ Roger Tang, “Asian American Theater Revue – Asian American Tony Award Winners,” accessed November 20, 2019. <https://aatrevue.com/Newsblog/info-on-the-revue/asian-american-tony-award-winners/>.

⁵⁸¹ Teeman, “See Us, Trust Us, Employ Us: Broadway’s Women of Color on Confronting Racism – and Reshaping Theater”.

⁵⁸² Eric King, “Celebrating Black History Month: Broadway Milestones You Ought to Know,” accessed November 12, 2019. <https://www.broadway.com/buzz/194844/celebrating-black-history-month-broadway-milestones-you-ought-to-know/>.

⁵⁸³ Teeman, “See Us, Trust Us, Employ Us: Broadway’s Women of Color on Confronting Racism – and Reshaping Theater”.

⁵⁸⁴ Between 1968 and 1982, the only African-American female performer to receive a Tony was Virginia Capers, as best lead actress in *A Raisin in the Sun* (1974). After this show, she never appeared in a Broadway show again.

⁵⁸⁵ The Broadway League, “Jennifer Holliday – Awards,” accessed November 15, 2019. <https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-cast-staff/jennifer-holliday-45386#Awards>.

⁵⁸⁶ King, “Celebrating Black History Month: Broadway Milestones You Ought to Know”.

won her third Tony in the Category *Tony Award for Best Performance by an Actress in a Featured Role in a Musical* in 1998 for *Ragtime* and another for the play *A Raisin in the Sun* in 2004 and became the first to be a five-time Tony winner when she won the *Tony Award for Best Performance by an Actress in a Leading Role in a Musical* in 2012 for *Porgy and Bess*. Finally, she became the first performer ever to be a six-time Tony winner in 2014, for her appearance in *Lady Day at Emerson's Bar & Grill*.⁵⁸⁷ Celebrated in that show for her voice, “an instrument of operatic force,”⁵⁸⁸ and for having “acting chops to back it up,”⁵⁸⁹ McDonald presented a powerful portrayal of African-American jazz singer Billie Holiday, even though she is a classically-trained singer and not a Broadway Belt.⁵⁹⁰ It might be noted that her awards were presented – except those as a *featured* actress for *Master Class* and *Carousel* – for portraying explicitly African-American characters; she was often the “first,” but could not really break boundaries as far as roles in Broadway musicals and plays were concerned.

Examining elite African-American Broadway musical performers and their portrayals in Broadway musical theatre reveals that, to the present day, they almost exclusively have originated roles based on black stock characters. Only a few ever passed a color-blind casting and even fewer have become the female lead in a multiracial cast, portraying a character *not* centered on the issue of race; this is as true for new musicals as it is for revivals. According to *Women of Color on Broadway*, “Between 2008 and 2015 people of color represented less than 25 percent of the theater industry,”⁵⁹¹ and this number includes *all* professional people of color in theatre, not only performers and not only African-Americans. Even the most successful African-American belters are not showered with roles to play, and rarely do they have a

⁵⁸⁷ “Tony Award Winners – Audra McDonald,” accessed June 13, 2020. <https://www.tonyawards.com/winners/?q=Audra>.

⁵⁸⁸ Feldman and Cote, “The 25 Best Broadway Divas of All Time”.

⁵⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁰ It would be interesting to examine female classically-trained African-American musical performers on Broadway in comparison to natural belters, especially under the cultural and social aspect of *Bel canto*.

⁵⁹¹ *Woman of Color on Broadway* cit. in Teeman, “See Us, Trust Us, Employ Us: Broadway’s Women of Color on Confronting Racism – and Reshaping Theater”.

chance to take on color-blind parts. For example, after her success in *Dreamgirls* in 1981, Jennifer Holliday's original belt voice could only be heard in three productions on Broadway, and then only in replacements.⁵⁹² LaChanze (in 2006) and Cynthia Erivo (in 2016) became both Tony winners for their portrayal of Celie in *The Color Purple*. However, it had been 15 years since LaChanze had earned her Tony nomination as featured actress in *Once On This Island* in 1991, and it took her another 12 years after *The Color Purple* to become a Tony nominee again, in 2018 for portraying Donna Summer in *Summer – The Donna Summer Musical*.⁵⁹³ Erivo never reappeared as the lead in a Broadway musical after she left *The Color Purple* at the end of the show's Broadway run on January 8, 2017.⁵⁹⁴ All of these Tonys were given for the portrayals of African-American characters. "There is always this question when people of color enter a field where they are not dominant; that thinking of, 'Well we wanted them, but we couldn't find any capable ones,'"⁵⁹⁵ states Morisseau. "We're like 'No, there's tons of capable people of color. We were always here. We're not going to play that game anymore.' We're excited to change that narrative not just in the show, but in our field."⁵⁹⁶ There is no reason to oppose diverse castings for roles that are not about slavery or abused African-American women, and I support the view of performer Candice Marie Woods who, according to Teeman, "would love to see stories not about slavery or downtrodden black women, but about people with regular lives that she [Woods] could recognize."⁵⁹⁷ Color-blind or color-conscious casting has existed for a long time, like that for the Broadway revival of *Sweet Charity* (1986) and the role of

⁵⁹² The Broadway League, "Jennifer Holliday," accessed April 2, 2020. <https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-cast-staff/jennifer-holliday-45386>.

⁵⁹³ "Tony Award Nominations – LaChanze," accessed June 13, 2020. <https://www.tonyawards.com/nominees/?q=LaChanze>.

⁵⁹⁴ Tony Award * Productions, "Tony Award Winners". Internet Movie Database, "Cynthia Erivo," accessed June 14, 2020. https://www.imdb.com/name/nm7248827/?ref_=fn_al_nm_1. Serendipitously, Erivo was an 2020 Oscar nominee for portraying abolitionist Araminta "Minty" Ross/Harriet Tubman in the movie "Harriet" and for her rendition of the song "Stand Up (from Harriet)," which she co-wrote with Joshuah Brian Campbell. See *ibid*.

⁵⁹⁵ Teeman, "See Us, Trust Us, Employ Us: Broadway's Women of Color on Confronting Racism – and Reshaping Theater".

⁵⁹⁶ *Ibid*.

⁵⁹⁷ *Ibid*.

Anita in the revival of *West Side Story* (1980), both portrayed by Debbie Allen,⁵⁹⁸ but, forty years later, such castings are still exceptions.

According to King, “there is still a long way to go toward racial equality, but strides have been made by black actors who have recently originated, replaced, or gone on as an understudy as characters that have usually being perceived as white.”⁵⁹⁹ Examples are Nicolette Robinson as Jenna in *Waitress*, Aisha Jackson as Anna in *Frozen*, Brittney Johnson as Glinda in *Wicked*, and Christiani Pitts as Ann Darrow in *King Kong*.⁶⁰⁰ In 2017, the first study of diversity by the union of Actors’ Equity examined the casts of new productions that opened between 2013 and 2015, including production tours and off-Broadway shows.⁶⁰¹ This study demonstrated that women were underrepresented as principals in a musical, and received lower salaries.⁶⁰² Martine Sainvil, the spokesperson for The Broadway League, said ensuring true diversity on and off-stage was “a challenge the entire industry is working on. We’re not there yet, but the effort is being put in to try to do better.”⁶⁰³ Hopefully, the elite Broadway belters of the 21st century will not only be multiracial⁶⁰⁴ but portray strong feminist roles as the elite belters of the 20th century did and still do. In fact, they must solve more than one problem.

In 1989, the theoretical framework about feminism and the fight against racial injustice has found a term, “intersectionality,” coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw⁶⁰⁵ to explain the oppression of African-American women. She explains:

⁵⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁹ King, “Celebrating Black History Month: Broadway Milestones You Ought to Know”

⁶⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁰¹ Teeman, “See Us, Trust Us, Employ Us: Broadway’s Women of Color on Confronting Racism – and Reshaping Theater”.

⁶⁰² Ibid.

⁶⁰³ Martine Sainvil cit. in ibid.

⁶⁰⁴ See the testimonial speaking to racism, entitled “Dear White American Theater”: “We See You, White American Theater,” accessed June 13, 2020. <https://www.weseeyouwat.com>. and: “U.S. Theatre World Accused of Exploiting, Excluding People of Color,” *The New York Times*, no. June 9 (2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2020/06/09/arts/o9reuters-minneapolis-police-theatre.html>.

⁶⁰⁵ See Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.” 139–168.

Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It's not simply that there's a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LBGTQ problem there. Many times that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to all these things.⁶⁰⁶

Although my subject is the Broadway Belt and this chapter is intended to concentrate on African-American Broadway belters, it is crucial to recognize that, according to Crenshaw's explanation, the theoretical framework of intersectionality in Broadway musical theatre concerns not only gender and ethnicity but also *genderqueerness*.⁶⁰⁷ Alexandra Billings made history when she became the first openly transgender actress to play the female role of Madame Morrible in *Wicked* on Broadway, debuting on January 20, 2020.⁶⁰⁸ However, there still are few examples of this sort of authentic boundary-breaking on Broadway. Certainly, Laverne Cox was the first transgender actress portraying Frank-N-Furter, a character usually portrayed by a male performer and described as "a sweet transvestite from Transsexual, Transylvania,"⁶⁰⁹ in Fox's television remake of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, premiering October 20, 2016.⁶¹⁰ She also was the first transgender person to play a transgender series regular, as Cameron Wirth on CBS's *Doubt*, premiering on February 15, 2017.⁶¹¹ However, television is not "live on Broadway."⁶¹²

⁶⁰⁶ interview by Columbia Law School, 2017. <https://www.law.columbia.edu/pt-br/news/2017/06/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality>.

⁶⁰⁷ Genderqueerness is a synonym for non-binary identities, neither exclusively masculine, nor feminine. See University of Washington, "Femininity and Genderqueerness," accessed April 3, 2020. <https://depts.washington.edu/qcenter/wordpress/femininity-and-genderqueerness/>.

⁶⁰⁸ Andy Lefkowitz, "Alexandra Billings to Join *Wicked* as Madame Morrible; Will Be First Openly Trans Actress to Play the Role," *Broadway Buzz*, no. September 25 (2019), <https://www.broadway.com/buzz/197027/alexandra-billings-to-join-wicked-as-madame-morrible-will-be-first-openly-trans-actress-to-play-the-role/>.

⁶⁰⁹ Ryan McPhee, "Laverne Cox on Finding Her Voice for *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* & Her Dream Stage Roles," *Broadway Buzz*, no. October 10 (2016), <https://www.broadway.com/buzz/186277/laverne-cox-on-finding-her-voice-for-the-rocky-horror-picture-show-her-dream-stage-roles/>.

⁶¹⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹¹ Neal Justin, "Laverne Cox Makes History in 'Doubt' as First Transgender Star of Network Drama," *Star Tribune*, no. February 20 (2017), <https://www.startribune.com/laverne-cox-makes-history-in-doubt-as-first-transgender-star-of-a-network-drama/413724553/>.

⁶¹² Hoping that future academic work will shine a light on this subject, I need to return to my subject, the Broadway Belt.

To close this discussion on *Belting and Feminism*, belting out on stage and speaking up offstage are powerful instruments to advance not only feminism in Broadway musical theatre but also to push on intersectionality in Broadway musical theatre and to advocate for in the American society.⁶¹³ As long as feminist roles in new productions of revivals and, even more, in new musicals are rare, and as long as belters of color are limited chiefly to originating cliché roles, it remains crucial that *all* elite Broadway belters continue to fight for roles independent from their ethnicity and gender. By speaking up offstage, they reinforce the feminist actor's personage of a Broadway Belt. However, that is not enough. To improve feminist and multiracial casting on Broadway, gender-clinché and ethnic-clinché roles in Broadway musical revivals should not be revived as such, and neither should they be created for new shows. It is just not enough to put in a little feminist twist, as in *Pretty Woman*.⁶¹⁴ It is necessary to create new, ethnicity- and even gender-independent⁶¹⁵ feminist characters for the leading “lady” in a Broadway musical and to “keep pushing.”⁶¹⁶ American musical theatre needs the Broadway Belt back in an influential position. “To end on a happy note,” says Julia

⁶¹³ As does (white) Broadway Belt Patti LuPone: “I am sick and tired of old white men quite frankly … First of all they are the luckiest human beings on the planet, white men. … I want to see diversity, diversity, diversity.” See Tim Teeman, “Patti LuPone on Her Plan to Leave America, Drugs, Sex, Feuds, Broadway – and Basement Videos,” *The Daily Beast*, no. April 26 (2020), <https://www.thedailybeast.com/patti-lupone-on-her-plan-to-leave-america-hollywood-sondheim-drugs-feuds-and-broadways-future>.

⁶¹⁴ In *Pretty Woman – The Musical*, Vivian is sexually assaulted but defends herself, contrary to the original movie from 1990, in which Edward saves her. See Michael Paulson, “The Problem With Broadway Revivals: They Revive Gender Stereotypes, Too,” *The New York Times*, no. February 22 (2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/22/theater/gender-stereotypes-carousel-my-fair-lady-pretty-woman.html>.

⁶¹⁵ Why not, for example, cast a woman as Valjean or a transgender person as Dolly or Rose? Hopefully, the female version of Bobby in the 2021 Broadway revival of gender-switched *Company* (following its 2018 West End revival) is just the beginning. See Logan Culwell-Block, “Hear Previews of Sondheim’s New Gender-Switched *Company* Lyrics From the Upcoming London Revival,” *Playbill*, no. September 20 (2018), <https://www.playbill.com/article/hear-previews-of-sondheims-new-gender-switched-company-lyrics-from-the-upcoming-london-revival>. and: Paulson, “‘Company’ Returning to Broadway, With a Woman at its Center”.

⁶¹⁶ Konstantinos Thomaidis’s work about “listening intersectionally to the gender, race, ethnicity, regionality and class of voicing bodies” might be a good starting point for further research. See Konstantinos Thomaidis, *Theatre & Voice* (London: Palgrave, Macmillan Education, 2017). 56.

Jordan,⁶¹⁷ “10 years ago all-male, all-white seasons were commonplace. Today they are virtually non-existent.”⁶¹⁸ Feminism is always a social *and* intellectual movement. Hopefully, strong feminist actor’s personages will continue to speak up publicly and to belt out on a Broadway stage.

617 Julia Jordan is executive director of *The Lillys*, an initiative established in 2010 for “celebrating, supporting, and advocating for women theatre artists by promoting gender parity at all levels of theatrical production.” See The Lillys Board of Directors, “The Lillys”.

618 Teeman, “See Us, Trust Us, Employ Us: Broadway’s Women of Color on Confronting Racism – and Reshaping Theater”.

4 Gypsy's Rose and Rose Hovick – A Case Study

The musical *Gypsy* by composer Jule Styne and playwright Arthur Laurents, with lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, and choreography by Jerome Robbins, is a frequent subject in the academic field of Broadway musical theatre studies. However, its leading character and its many layers, as interpreted by different Broadway belters, still bears examination: The character Rose is loosely based on the original Rose Hovick (1892–1954), as she was described by contemporary witnesses and by her daughters. Hovick was a divorced mother. Her daughter June ran away from her, changed her name to *June Havoc*, and became a recognized American television- and movie actress. Her daughter Louise started her career in burlesque and adopted the name *Gypsy Rose Lee*, as whom she was celebrated for her striptease acts in the second half of the 1920s. The musical *Gypsy* is the story of Rose pushing her daughters in a vaudeville child act in search of fame and fortune. Since Hovick¹ was a strong, independent woman and single mother at the beginning of the 20th century, it is necessary to put her in the context of early feminism before examining the musical's character based on her, Rose.

However, Arthur Laurents's character was not like Hovick. He was hired by David Merrick to write the script for a new musical, based on the book *Gypsy – Memoirs of America's most celebrated stripper*, written by Hovick's daughter Louise and published in 1957.² According to Carolyn Quinn, Laurents was not very intrigued by Louise's story, but after speaking at a party to a woman, Selma Lynch, who had known the real Hovick, he became intrigued by Louise's mother.³ Lynch described Hovick as "charming, charismatic – and also a ball-buster,"⁴ and Laurents decided that the new musical's main character would not be the stripper

¹ From this point, I will use "Hovick" for the original Rose Hovick, the human being, and "Rose" for the character, to clearly differentiate between them.

² Carolyn Quinn, *Mama Rose's Turn – The True Story of America's Most Notorious Stage Mother* (Oxford: The University Press of Mississippi, 2013). Pos. 163.

³ Ibid. Pos. 163–173.

⁴ Selma Lynch cit. in ibid.

Gypsy Rose Lee, as originally planned, but her mother. Laurents shifted the focus from June and Louise, the performing children, onto Hovick, presenting her as a “take-no-prisoners stage mother.”⁵ As Quinn states:

He left out most of the real Rose’s delicate charm and concentrated on creating, instead, a more dramatic character, an issue-laden human steamroller. Tough Broadway belter Ethel Merman was signed to play Rose. Once Laurents knew the identity of the actress for whom he was writing the part, he shaped the character of his fictional Rose to match Merman’s boisterous personality.⁶

Consequently, it would not be right to compare Hovick directly with different interpretations of the character Rose. However, the comparison of Hovick’s gender and social status in the United States in the 1920s, with these factors at the time of *Gypsy*’s Broadway premiere in 1959 and then four Broadway revivals from 1974 to 2009, is crucial to explore the Broadway belters who portrayed Rose. Chapter 4.1, *Rose – A Feminist in Changing Times*, will concentrate on the gender and social status of Hovick and the understanding of the character Rose in the context of feminism. I will discuss the interpretation of Rose in each era to exhibit the strong implications of feminism on *Gypsy* and vice versa and to establish, through the example of this character, the importance of the Broadway Belt as an advocate for women’s rights. Chapter 4.2, *Portraying Rose – The Diva Musical in the Need of a Diva*, highlights *Gypsy* and its lead character in the context of Broadway musical history. My analysis concentrates on addressing the question of why diva musicals, and especially *Gypsy* and its respective divas, are crucial for Broadway musical theatre. Chapter 4.3 *Acting in Gypsy – Between Femininity and Motherhood* will focus on the acting aspect of the character of Rose. Representing, on the one hand, a divorced woman still (arguably) hoping to find love, and on the other hand, a single mother of two children, Rose’s five portrayals on Broadway over a time span of fifty years have different focuses. The section will demonstrate the show’s development through

⁵ Ibid. Pos. 173.

⁶ Ibid. Pos. 171.

fifty years, from the premiere in 1959 to the fourth revival in 2008, comparing the belters' most crucial intentions to approach the character in her own way. Finally, chapter 4.4, "Rose's Turn" – *The Belter's Turn*, will focus on the character's eleven-o'clock-number, "Rose's Turn," and its vocal rendition. Comparing this song's vocal rendition in connection with the respective theatrical interpretation of each leading lady (Merman, Lansbury, Daly, Peters, and LuPone) will show how crucial a belt voice is for Broadway musical theatre despite its changing aesthetics. Additionally, this analysis will confirm the continuing necessity of diva roles for elite Broadway belters in Broadway musical theatre in the 21st century. At the time of the fourth wave of feminism and beyond, feminist leading-lady roles for strong acting Broadway belters are crucial to advocate for progress concerning women's social status, gender, and ethnicity in U.S. society in general, and particularly in one of America's popular art forms, the Broadway musical theatre.

4.1 Rose – A Feminist in Changing Times

After watching *Gypsy: A Musical Fable* with Angela Lansbury in the 1974 revival on Broadway, Carolyn Quinn was as intrigued by the origins of Hovick, born on August 31, 1892,⁷ as Rose Elizabeth Thompson,⁸ as I am intrigued by the Broadway Belt. In her book, *Mama Rose's Turn: The True Story of America's Most Notorious Stage Mother*, Quinn studies Hovick's origins and life in detail.⁹ My analysis will concentrate on the circumstances of Hovick's life between 1914 and the 1920s when she was predominantly a divorced mother of two and decided to leave Seattle with her children, Louise and June, to find a better life for all three of them. On August 19, 1914, she was granted the divorce of Jack

⁷ According to the 1900 and 1910 U.S. censuses, Rose was born in 1892, not in 1890, as often written. See note 12, Notes and Sources of chapter 2: Seattle, Washington 1910s in Karen Abbott, *American Rose – A Nation Laid Bare: The Life and Times of Gypsy Rose Lee* (New York: Random House Inc., 2010). 357.

⁸ Some sources name her Rose Evangeline Thompson. According to Quinn, Rose sometimes called herself Rose Evangeline, while her little sister, Belle Evangeline, called herself Belle Elizabeth. "Their names were like toys." See Quinn, *Mama Rose's Turn – The True Story of America's Most Notorious Stage Mother*. 28.

⁹ Ibid. 28.

Hovick and returned to her parents' home with her children.¹⁰ Since the Catholic church prohibited against divorce, Hovick remarried two years later Judson Brenneman at the First Unitarian Church in Seattle.¹¹ Brenneman filed for divorce on September 5, 1917.¹² At the end of the decade, Rose was about 29 when she met Murray Gordon Edelston who became the children's manager.¹³ He is portrayed as Herbie in the Broadway musical *Gypsy*.

Contrary to the musical's portrayal of the character Rose as a middle-aged woman, Hovick was still in her twenties when she put her children on the vaudeville stage at the beginning of the 1920s.¹⁴ The young two-time divorcee lived with Gordon, as Edelston called himself,¹⁵ with her children from her first marriage traveling together from vaudeville theater to vaudeville theater around the country in pursuit of the children's success.¹⁶ According to Quinn, Hovick resisted Gordon's frequent marriage proposals, even after four years of their union.¹⁷ As Quinn states, "The situation grew more complicated because Rose was from a Christian family and Gordon was Jewish. At that time, what was called a mixed marriage between a Christian and a Jew was considered scandalous."¹⁸ Nevertheless, that was probably not the reason why Hovick refused to get married to Gordon. Since her previous relationship with Daddy Jay (as his name was remembered by June¹⁹), Hovick was "finished with the idea of domesticity"²⁰ and it became Rose's most crucial goal to propel her daughters into stardom.

Although she had certainly no intention of becoming a suffragette and taking part in the women's movement, her mode of life was exercised feminism. Independently of her reasons to do so, she freed herself

¹⁰ Ibid. 54–55.

¹¹ Ibid. 59.

¹² Ibid. 66.

¹³ Ibid. 84.

¹⁴ In 1920, Rose was 28 years old, Louise, born in 1911, was 9, and June, born in 1912, 8 years old.

¹⁵ Quinn, *Mama Rose's Turn – The True Story of America's Most Notorious Stage Mother*. 84.

¹⁶ Ibid. 84.

¹⁷ Ibid. 97–98.

¹⁸ Ibid. 98.

¹⁹ Ibid. 67.

²⁰ Ibid. 68.

of two (or three)²¹ unhappy marriages and became a businesswoman marketing her daughters, especially June, as future stars. This is remarkable because in 1920, as *The New York Times* was warning against granting women under 30 the right to vote and young feminist women were fighting for freedom in their personal lives, Hovick was already exercising such freedom extensively.²² As Judith Mackrell states:

Ideas of duty, sacrifice and the greater good had been debunked by the recent war; for this generation, morality resided in being true to one's self, not to a cause. Towards the end of the decade, some feminists would argue that women's great achievement in the 20s was learning to value their individuality.²³

It was the time when young women were publicly referred to as hypersexualized and shallow – as “scantly clad, jazzing flappers to whom a dance, a new hat or a man with a car is of more importance than the fate of nations,”²⁴ explains Mackrell. When the *Matrimonial Causes Act 1923* made adultery by either husband or wife the sole ground for divorce and, thus, divorce easier for women, Hovick’s divorces were already a couple of years behind her. Unperturbedly pursuing her goal, Hovick was definitively “true to herself” and her behavior was, by this measure, feminist. As a member of the “comparatively apolitical and self-absorbed”²⁵ flapper generation, she was inactive as a feminist and neither stated nor displayed a political position concerning gender and social status, as far as biographical sources describe her. However, in Hovick’s era, feminists “puzzled out what freedom meant and tested their personal limits as they were broaching issues that would be hotly debated during the 60s and 70s.”²⁶ Hence, it might have been a coinci-

²¹ According to Quinn, there is no evidence that Rose and Daddy Jay, the third man in her life, were indeed married. However, “both daughters remembered that there was a third husband.” Ibid. 67.

²² Judith Mackrell, “The 1920s: ‘Young Women Took the Struggle for Freedom into their Personal Lives,’ *The Guardian*, no. February 5 (2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2018/feb/05/the-1920s-young-women-took-the-struggle-for-freedom-into-their-personal-lives>.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

dence that *Gypsy* premiered in 1959, in the burgeoning second wave of feminism, so to speak, but it looks more like a logical consequence to me. Although the character of Rose did not really correspond to Hovick, the feminist attitude of Hovick and that of Ethel Merman, who originated the character Rose, show similarities.

4.1.1 Ethel Merman – The Working-Class Idol

When Merman originated the character of Rose in 1959, she was fifty-one years old, and for about thirty years the most significant belter on Broadway. Like Hovick, Merman lived her private life ahead of the times, as described in chapter 3.4, and these women's lives resembled each other. However, Merman's private situation was much more dramatic than Hovick's: Merman was a four-time divorcee, and her second husband and father of Bobby and Ethel Jr., Bob Levitt, committed suicide on January 28, 1958, about fifteen months before *Gypsy*'s premiere.²⁷ However, what Kellow describes as the worst moment of Merman's life happened later, in 1967, when Merman's daughter, Ethel Jr., died from an overdose of pills – like her father.²⁸ Her death was considered accidental,²⁹ but that certainly did not reduce the pain. Seen in a certain way, Merman's daughter left her as Hovick's daughter June did. Nine years before Ethel Jr. passed away, Merman went to New York for rehearsals of *Gypsy*, leaving her children behind in Colorado under the supervision of a governess and her third husband, Robert Six.³⁰ Even though it was the "longest separation from her children she had known,"³¹ Merman concentrated on her career, as Hovick had focused on that of her children.

Merman received the script of *Gypsy* ("the greatest script – finally,"³² as she recalled according to Kellow) in 1958, several months after the closing of *Happy Hunting* and after Levitt's death. As Kellow writes:

²⁷ Kellow, *Ethel Merman: A Life*. 171.

²⁸ Ibid. 215.

²⁹ Ibid. 173.

³⁰ Ibid. 179.

³¹ Ibid. 180.

³² Ethel Merman cit. in ibid. 173.

After Happy Hunting she had finally tired of playing blowsy, diamond-in-the-rough musical-comedy parts, and she was eager to show that she could do something of a serious nature – hoping, no doubt, that she would be able to blot out people's memories of *Happy Hunting*. Gypsy came along just when she needed it most.³³

When Laurents described for her the character Rose as a monster and asked Merman how far she would go, she confirmed: "I want to act and will do anything you want."³⁴ The singer Merman, with her loud belt voice, was ready to work as hard to be recognized as an *actress*, as Hovick was for her children's success. Despite Robbins's idea – as the director and choreographer of the 1959 *Gypsy* – to turn the show into a "parade of vaudeville and burlesque routines,"³⁵ Laurents insisted that *Gypsy*'s subject was "the need for recognition, a need everyone has in one way or another."³⁶ While Merman searched for recognition from her audience, portraying Hovick searching for recognition from her daughters, second-wave feminism would soon challenge motherhood and marriage.³⁷ Throughout the 1950s, the family became the center of American life (see chapter 3.4). Women gave up their careers to become housewives and the average age of a bride getting married was 20.³⁸ Postwar wives became frustrated about the limits of this lifestyle and wanted a less constrained life for their daughters.³⁹ Showing Rose as "a dramatic character, an issue-laden human steamroller,"⁴⁰ *Gypsy* puts motherhood and marriage at center stage but in an unconventional way. A woman and mother who did such "horrible" things had to have *issues* and could only be an unorthodox outsider from society. Thus the role of

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ethel Merman cit. in Citron, *Sondheim and Lloyd-Webber – The New Musical*. 87.

³⁵ Kellow, *Ethel Merman: A Life*. 174.

³⁶ Arthur Laurents cit. in ibid. 87.

³⁷ Art & Archives – U.S. House of Representatives History, "Women in Congress, 1917–2006: Postwar Gender Roles and Women in American Politics," accessed December 18, 2019. <https://history.house.gov/Exhibitions-and-Publications/WIC/Historical-Essays/Changing-Guard/Identity/>.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Quinn, *Mama Rose's Turn – The True Story of America's Most Notorious Stage Mother*. 4.

Rose needed someone like Merman, exercising unconventional gender performance. Nevertheless, in 1959 the typical middle-class audience's and critic's conventional reception of Rose's character was the monster dragging her children through show business to get attention herself.⁴¹ Laurents's primarily dramatical conception for the part went in the same direction. Rose stood for a self-determined woman who originally was not reluctant about the idea of marriage but searched for a better future for her children and herself. That image corresponds perfectly to the intentions of second-wave feminists. Consequently, Rose's determination could satisfy the feminist theatergoers while – failing at her goal to improve the lot of her family – she was the perfect *bad example* for the traditional middle- and upper-class couples in the audience. In this context, it is also crucial to remember that, since the feminization of vaudeville theatre mentioned in chapter 2.1.2, Broadway musical audiences had become predominantly female, as it remains today.⁴² To be commercially and artistically successful, Laurents's portrayal of Rose had to please the complete audience (feminist and the traditional middle- and upper-class couples), and the fact that the character could be interpreted in both ways, could only be beneficial for ticket sales.

However, what was the character that Laurents really wanted to create? According to Citron, "His idea was that the musical would be super-realistic."⁴³ Indeed, when it comes to the story of Hovick, women's general unhappiness as housewives and mothers at the end of the 1950s was a reality, even though Laurents's script was "almost entirely fictionalized."⁴⁴ As John M. Clum suggests, "Laurents was not consciously offering a feminist critique of women's limited roles in the American middle-class in the second half of the century, but one can easily read

⁴¹ I will discuss comments and criticisms about *Gypsy* and the character Rose in the following chapter.

⁴² According to *The New York Times*, "The audience remains disproportionately female (66 percent)." See Michael Paulson, "Not Just For Grown-Ups: The Broadway Audience Is Getting Younger," *The New York Times*, no. October 19 (2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/19/theater/broadway-league-theater-audience-demographics.html>.

⁴³ Citron, *Sondheim and Lloyd-Webber – The New Musical*. 87.

⁴⁴ Quinn, *Mama Rose's Turn – The True Story of America's Most Notorious Stage Mother*. Pos. 173.

such a critique into his work.”⁴⁵ Such a reading is largely supported, for example by Laurie Winer from *The New York Times*, who writes, “She may have been the most unredeemably selfish woman who ever blazed across the center of a Broadway musical. But when Ethel Merman first played her in 1959, Rose also stood out in the musical landscape as a woman who insists on something new for herself and her children.”⁴⁶ That said, it was not only Rose who “insists on something new”; Merman did too. According to Clum, “For the first time, she [Merman] was given a three-dimensional character to play that perfectly fit her personality and hard-driving musical style.”⁴⁷ Thus *Gypsy*’s leading lady’s actor’s personage corresponded to the character Rose, at least partially. “Merman, as usual, did her thing on stage with everyone else in the background,”⁴⁸ states Clum, who goes on to question Merman’s portrayal: “Was this an acting choice or Merman’s usual modus operandi?”⁴⁹ Consequently, the perception of the character as feminist was real, because the character became *real* through the resemblance with the star’s actor’s personage. Although Quinn claims that “once Laurents knew the identity of the actress for whom he was writing the part, he shaped the character of his fiction Rose to match Merman’s boisterous personality,”⁵⁰ Laurents, the playwright himself, remembers it slightly differently: “Merman had this glorious voice. She was also not very smart – I’m censoring myself – and she was naïve and sexless … She was wonderful to work with. She was also common, and Rose is common as dirt.”⁵¹ This appears to broadly contradict Quinn’s suggestion that Laurents shaped the character for Merman. Besides her vocal qualities and her stardom, Merman was simply the perfect match for this role at the end of the 1950s: Merman’s actor’s personage that the audience

⁴⁵ John M. Clum, *The Works of Arthur Laurents – Politics, Love, And Betrayal* (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2014). Pos. 114.

⁴⁶ Winer, “Why Sondheim’s Women Are Different.”

⁴⁷ John M. Clum, “Acting,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). 314.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Quinn, *Mama Rose’s Turn – The True Story of America’s Most Notorious Stage Mother*. Pos. 173.

⁵¹ Arthur Laurents cit. in Bryer and Davison, *The Art of the American Musical – Conversations with the Creators*. 137.

knew on- and offstage merged with her portrayal and the character as invented by Laurents. As I showed in chapter 3.3.2, Merman regularly delivered an unconventional gender performance offstage; represented the feminism of the working class as a successful star despite her middle-class origins; and was a woman, mother, and (occasionally) a wife with a dramatic private life. Clum confirms:

In a way, with all her limitations, Merman was perfectly cast to play this character, not because of her acting ability, but because she fit the original conception of the character. She, too, was a representative of a different era of show business. It is no surprise that *Gypsy* was the last musical she originated and one of the last musicals we consider classics.⁵²

With the changing aesthetics in Broadway musical theatre in this era, the *musical drama* needed a strong actress. Merman could not continue to belt her way through a musical comedy; she needed artistic recognition as an actress to move forward in her career. Laurents and Sondheim considered Merman's acting qualities to be quite rudimentary.⁵³ However, as the analysis of the song "Rose's Turn" in chapter 4.4 will demonstrate, even though Merman's strength in this portrayal remained her belt voice, according to Kellow, "She was unquestionably giving the most powerful and heartfelt performance of her life."⁵⁴ Once again, Merman became the link between the first and the second wave of feminism, but this time with her performance as an *acting* belter, portraying Rose.

4.1.2 Angela Lansbury – The Dame with the Feminine Touch

During the 1960s, feminism had made considerable progress. According to Peter Deakin, "the second wave cared deeply about the casual, systemic sexism ingrained into society – the belief that women's highest

⁵² Clum, "Acting," 314–315.

⁵³ As Laurents states, "She was not very bright. Steve called her the talking dog. And I wrote the stage directions 'louder,' 'softer,' and she would say, 'That's what it says here, so I'm doing it!'" See Meryle Secrest, *Stephen Sondheim – A Life* (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, INC., 1998). 136.

⁵⁴ Kellow, *Ethel Merman: A Life*. 182.

purposes were domestic and decorative, and the social standards that reinforced that belief – and in naming these beliefs ‘sexist,’ it aimed also to explicitly unhinge them.”⁵⁵ Actually, with second-wave feminism reaching its peak, the Broadway musical of this decade represented women in quite contradictory ways. Some musical stories were about women “as conscious agents in their lives and careers,”⁵⁶ for example in *The King and I*; *Hello, Dolly!* and *Mame*, while other musical plots of that time “condemned a single woman for her sexuality or her independence,”⁵⁷ as in *Cabaret* and *Sweet Charity*. However, in 1970s U.S. society, the single, working mother became commonplace, because many marriages did not survive two careers and the sharing of family duties like mutual spouse aid and parenting.⁵⁸

In 1974, at the time that character actress Angela Lansbury portrayed Rose in *Gypsy*’s first Broadway revival, Sondheim’s *Company* – which had premiered in 1970 – had already exemplified the concept musical as the new sub-genre of Broadway musical theatre and had begun to influence the reception of audiences and critics. As Stacy Wolf says:

In the 1970s, as feminism entered the mainstream, musical theatre presented women and men in more collaborative social units. In each musical, though, women also step out of the ensemble and put a feminine spin on the musical’s emotional and political effects.⁵⁹

Consequently, *Gypsy*’s revival would need some adaptions to the new political and social situation of women, especially with playwright Laurents as the new director.⁶⁰ While Jerome Robbins had directed the orig-

⁵⁵ Peter Deakin, *White Masculinity in Crisis in Hollywood’s Fin de Millennium Cinema* (London: Lexington Books, 2019). 5.

⁵⁶ Wolf, *Changed for Good – A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*. Pos. 1148.

⁵⁷ Ibid. Pos. 1154.

⁵⁸ According to Bradford Wilcox, Governor Ronald Reagan’s no-fault-divorce bill in 1969, the sexual revolution, and the “soul-mate model” of marriage each had a large responsibility in the rise of divorce. See Bradford W. Wilcox, “The Evolution of Divorce,” *National Affairs*, no. Winter 2020 (2009), <https://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/the-evolution-of-divorce>.

⁵⁹ Wolf, *Changed for Good – A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*. Pos. 1868.

⁶⁰ Robert Emmet Long, *Broadway, the Golden Years – Jerome Robbins and the Great Choreographer-Directors 1940 to the Present* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 2003). 117.

inal *Gypsy* in 1959, Laurents directed the first revival with Lansbury in 1974, the second revival with Tyne Daly in 1989, and the fourth revival with Patti LuPone in 2008.⁶¹ During his 94-year-long life, Laurents was present at the premiere and all four Broadway revivals of *Gypsy*. Asked if he had made changes, Laurents answered, “I don’t think that you update. I didn’t change any of the lines or any of the songs in *Gypsy*. I changed the attitudes of the people … You couldn’t have done this in the fifties.”⁶² The most remarkable change of attitude from the 1974 revival on concerned “Rose’s Turn,” the leading lady’s eleven-o’clock-number. On the advice of Oscar Hammerstein, who visited *Gypsy* in 1959 during its previews in Philadelphia, Merman was granted applause from the audience after this number.⁶³ While Sondheim insisted that “a woman having a nervous breakdown should not get applause from an audience,”⁶⁴ Hammerstein argued differently: “Since the scene that follows is what the entire play is about, if you want them to listen, you must let them release themselves.”⁶⁵ Thus, after “Rose’s Turn,” Merman received her well-deserved applause as the most celebrated belting Broadway diva of the era, but to do so she was forced to step out of the character. As Laurents remembers:

Rose left the stage while Ethel Merman took her bow. Bows. Endless. She brought the house down and the show went out the window. No one listened to the last scene; it was even suggested it be cut. Ethel was happy, the audience was happy, and if I wasn’t, how could I complain?⁶⁶

On the contrary, in 1974, Laurents returned to his original intention, to show that it happens all in the character’s “recognition-hungry head.”⁶⁷ He explained to Lansbury:

⁶¹ Director of the third revival in 2003 was Sam Mendes.

⁶² Arthur Laurents cit. in Bryer and Davison, *The Art of the American Musical – Conversations with the Creators*. 139.

⁶³ Citron, *Sondheim and Lloyd-Webber – The New Musical*. 93.

⁶⁴ Stephen Sondheim cit. in *ibid.*

⁶⁵ Oscar Hammerstein cit. in *ibid.*

⁶⁶ Arthur Laurents, *Mainly on Directing – Gypsy, West Side Story, and Other Musicals* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009). 33.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 34.

The stage is ablaze with ROSE in huge lights. There's a huge spotlight on Rose as she bows to thunderous applause, even cheers. And bows again. The spot goes with her as she moves to one side and bows again. Then the ROSE lights begin to drop out. She bows again. Now the ROSE lights are gone, and the stage light is diminishing. Still, she bows again. Only her spot is left now; the applause is dying out. Her spot is reduced to a dim glow. A work light comes on; the applause peters out then ends – but not for Rose: she still hears it. She takes a slow, deep, regal bow to deathly silence – and at that moment the audience gets it: there never was any applause for Rose; it was all in her head.⁶⁸

Laurents was convinced that it would work out with Lansbury because she was “a superb actress and a courageous one.”⁶⁹ It is certainly not fair when Laurents opined that there was “no one else in the musical theater who can sing as she [Angela Lansbury] does and be the actress she is.” Contrary to Lansbury, Merman sang without a microphone; thus she had to project her voice much more than Lansbury, and that was also exactly what she always had done since her first success in *Girl Crazy*. As Gerald Nachman states, “We have to step back from the movies and even the recordings and say we just don’t know what it was like to experience her live.”⁷⁰ Merman’s success was based on her belting abilities, and Lansbury’s on acting, and that is a crucial difference: Singing with a microphone allowed Lansbury to remain the actress even while she was singing. Merman *needed* to remain the singer to be able to project while she gave her best portraying Rose. According to Laurents, “In 1959, acting was hardly a priority in musicals. It wasn’t until 2006, however, that I cast the entire company – everyone, every small part, even one-line parts – with first-rate actors.”⁷¹

Although, in 1959, Lansbury might have had difficulties succeeding in portraying Rose as an actress, in 1974, the time was right for her. As the analysis of Lansbury’s rendition of “Rose’s Turn” in chapter 4.4 will

⁶⁸ Ibid. 34.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 33.

⁷⁰ Gerald Nachman, *Showstoppers! – The Surprising Backstage Stories of Broadway’s Most Remarkable Songs* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press Incorporated, 2017). 182.

⁷¹ Laurents, *Mainly on Directing – Gypsy, West Side Story, and Other Musicals*. 55.

show, her interpretation set new priorities for the portrayal of Rose. Since amplification was set up in Broadway musical theaters in the 1970s and natural vocal loudness was no longer crucial, audiences and critics did not expect Lansbury simply to belt out like Merman. Some visitors even had the impression of watching a new musical, and one critic stated that the musical didn't "feel like a revival. It's as if it had been born fresh, beautifully directed by Laurents."⁷² The first *Gypsy* revival on Broadway had only four previews and 120 performances,⁷³ but it had set the path for future revivals to come – and the need for strong actresses able to belt out Rose's songs.

Laurents stated many years later in an interview that "Angela Lansbury is a terrific woman, she sings up a storm, and she is a marvelous actress; but she couldn't be common. Her Rose was middle class and that was off"⁷⁴... Everything came easily and naturally to her, except the down-and-dirty vulgarity. That was as natural to Rose as being common, but not to Angie. She had to work hard to get that part of Rose."⁷⁵ Consequently, Lansbury's portrayal of Rose corresponded to her always-classy and feminine actor's personage as described in chapter 3.2.2. and 3.4.1. At a time when the musical needed "a feminine spin on the musical's emotional and political effects,"⁷⁶ to recall Wolf, Lansbury's actor's personage, as known by her audience and critics, corresponded to the needs of a revived, yet new portrayal of the character Rose. Hence, while Merman was the perfect match at the end of the 1950s, Lansbury was the right choice in the 1970s, when Broadway musical theatre's aesthetics and women's position in society had crucially changed. Lansbury's image, always being a lady without any aspect of Rose in her private life, offered this feminist role new perspectives of interpretation.

⁷² Long, *Broadway, the Golden Years – Jerome Robbins and the Great Choreographer-Directors 1940 to the Present*. 117.

⁷³ The Broadway League, "Gypsy – A Musical Fable".

⁷⁴ Arthur Laurents cit. in Bryer and Davison, *The Art of the American Musical – Conversations with the Creators*. 137.

⁷⁵ Laurents, *Mainly on Directing – Gypsy, West Side Story, and Other Musicals*. 35.

⁷⁶ Wolf, *Changed for Good – A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*. Pos. 1868.

Contrary to Merman, whose offstage life resembled Rose's to some extent, Lansbury approached life offstage more in the type of some Doris-Day-style movie characters of the 1950s and 1960s (see chapter 3.3.1). Lansbury lifted Rose's image up to the middle-class, but more as a *bad example* of a woman and mother than as a feminist, while Merman was an idol for working-class women and she and her portrayal of Rose proved that a woman of any social status can live a self-determined life. Merman and her Rose offered the concrete possibility of an identification with feminist ideals. In contrast, Lansbury's portrayal left this decision to the audience: Middle-class feminists could identify with Rose, while non-feminists could identify with Lansbury, the actress behind Rose, a loving wife and mother, gardening and cooking in her time offstage.

The character of Rose had changed faces in the years between 1959 and 1974. It also had changed with its different performers, and it had grown in its theatrical and social importance. Following this path, the next chapters will be dedicated to analyzing the evolution of Rose as a feminist character and the intentions of Tyne Daly, the respective Broadway Belt portraying her in 1989.

4.1.3 Tyne Daly – Younger, Sexier and Nicer

When Tyne Daly was cast as Rose for *Gypsy*'s third Broadway revival, she was a four-time Emmy Award winner for her appearance in the television series *Cagney & Lacey*⁷⁷ and a television celebrity. Her first Broadway appearance was in 1967's *That Summer, That Fall*, a short-lived play, before she triumphed as Rose on Broadway.⁷⁸ *Gypsy*'s second revival starring Tyne Daly premiered on November 16, 1989, less than two years before the Anita Hill case marked the burgeoning of third-wave feminism.

⁷⁷ Judy Samelson, "From the Archives: Tyne Daly Took on Rose for the 30th Anniversary of *Gypsy*," *Playbill*, no. May 22 (2019), <http://www.playbill.com/article/from-the-archives-tyne-daly-took-on-rose-for-the-30th-anniversary-of-gypsy>.

⁷⁸ The Broadway League, "Tyne Daly," accessed December 24, 2019. <https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-cast-staff/tyne-daly-37213>.

The 1980s was a period of some strong, publicly visible women, for example, British stateswoman Margaret Thatcher, astronaut and physicist Sally Ride, and pop-star Madonna, but it was also the time of the Reagan era and, as such, a time of backlash against second-wave feminism. Reagan opposed the demands of feminist activists (like the right to abortion), but that put only the *sex feminists* to the front. According to Meri Lisa Johnson, Ellen Willis's 1981 essay, "Lust Horizons: is the Women's Movement Pro-Sex?" was a response to the anti-pornography strand of feminism by the sex-positive feminists.⁷⁹ It promoted sex as an avenue of pleasure for women, seeing anti-pornography positions as aligned to the political right-wing's war on recreational sex and pornography.⁸⁰ Feminism in the 1980s was no longer "no bras, unshaved legs and unstyled hair"⁸¹ it was heralding the third wave. Consequently, for the second revival of *Gypsy* in 1989, casting Tyne Daly – considered a feminist icon in 1980s media due to her television role as woman detective Lacey,⁸² was an excellent choice. The strong and independent character of Lacey and Daly's equally strong television actor's personage merged well with the character Rose, and the audience inevitably perceived a part of Lacey in Daly's portrayal. However, despite her Tony-winning performance, television actress Daly could not establish herself on Broadway as former movie actress Lansbury did. Contrary to the other first-cast Broadway Roses, the Tony for her performance as Rose remains her only one until today. After the second revival of *Gypsy* closed on July 28, 1991, Daly appeared in only five limited-run productions on Broadway until 2015.⁸³ Even though there are many reasons for success or failure, it may be that, in the aftermath of third-wave feminism, her feminist actor's personage just did not fit the image of a

⁷⁹ Meri Lisa Johnson, *Third Wave Feminism and Television* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007). 70.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Caroline Evans, "Fashion is a Feminist Issue – Archive, 1989," *The Guardian*, no. November 13 (2019), <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2019/nov/13/fashion-is-a-feminist-issue-archive-1989>.

⁸² Neil Midgley, "Cagney and Lacey: A Salute to TV's Feminist Icons," *The Telegraph*, no. October 6 (2013), <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/10356842/Cagney-and-Lacey-a-salute-to-TVs-feminist-icons.html>.

⁸³ The Broadway League, "Tyne Daly".

Broadway diva⁸⁴ that the typical Broadway musical audience of the late 1990s and the early 2000s would like to see.

Nevertheless, Daly's success as Rose was huge, and *Gypsy*'s playwright, Laurents, spoke only in superlatives about Daly's portrayal: "What is wonderful about Tyne is she's found a great many positive things in Rose."⁸⁵ Laurents explained the power and success of the 1989 revival in a *New York Times* interview, "The main thing this time was that the person playing Rose was Tyne Daly, who is not only an actress, she is younger, she is sexual, she relates to men."⁸⁶ Actually, Daly was forty-three years old when she portrayed Rose. This age is much closer to the age of Hovick at the time her children left her. Merman and Lansbury were both over fifty when they portrayed Rose. Laurents was aware of how even the demands of the role of Rose changed not only with the actress but with the times: "Styles have changed. Today you have to play 'Gypsy' for every single thing that's in it. In the old days, you could ride over it and get to the songs quick."⁸⁷ Asked about how true he had been to the original production, Laurents answered, "That's one of my complaints about revivals. When I did a production of *Gypsy* with Tyne Daly, it was very, very different from the original – because times have changed. She's a terrific actress, and you can use that and play relationships that you couldn't have done earlier with Ethel Merman, who was only a buddy to a man. With Tyne, it was very sexual and that made it interesting."⁸⁸

The character Rose has become younger, sexier, and even nicer through the years, even for its creator Laurents, who himself had found something positive in Rose when he states: "These so-called monsters like [Rose in *Gypsy* and] Regina in *The Little Foxes* – there's something very gallant about these people. They're not hypocritical; they are what

⁸⁴ I will discuss the Broadway diva of the 1990s and the 2000s in chapter 4.2.

⁸⁵ Samelson, "From the Archives: Tyne Daly Took on Rose for the 30th Anniversary of *Gypsy*".

⁸⁶ Mervyn Rothstein, "Man behind 'Gypsy' Prefers Now to Then," *The New York Times*, no. January 15 (1990): <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/01/15/theater/man-behind-gypsy-prefers-now-to-then.html>.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Arthur Laurents cit. in Bryer and Davison, *The Art of the American Musical – Conversations with the Creators*. 136.

they are. Their values may be wrong, but their determination is admirable.”⁸⁹ As the musical *Gypsy* and the character Rose change with the times, so does the interpretation of the character’s last song, “Rose’s Turn,” as the song’s analysis in chapter 4.4 will show. “I think she [Daly] does ‘Rose’s Turn’ better than anyone ever has,”⁹⁰ said Laurents – as he had said in 1959 about Merman and in 1974 about Lansbury. The fact that women’s social status changes, throws new light on each Rose and the interpretation of her songs. Changing the casting of the leading lady from a Broadway singer (Merman) to a movie and Broadway actress (Lansbury), and now even to a television actress (Daly), had improved the character – as long as the performer knew how to belt out the songs. “I don’t think Merman would have gotten away with it today,”⁹¹ says Laurents. “The voice is a glorious trumpet, but it’s like: ‘Now I’m doing my ballad. Now I’m doing my comedy number. Now I’m doing my 2-4; I’ll do a little feeling here, but not too much.’”⁹² Thus acting had become more and more crucial in each revival. However, the ability to belt out Rose’s songs should not be underestimated, and portraying Rose convincingly as an actress probably would be less successful if her songs could not be heard throughout the theater, or the respective actress desperately had to scream or yell to be heard. This supports my argument that amplification had a major responsibility in the development of belting on Broadway. Amplification allows the Broadway Belt to be a strong actress without sacrificing the belt sound and vice versa. Moreover, changing times gave feminism in the U.S. a bigger voice. Consequently, feminist icon Tyne Daly portrayed Rose with a tad more sex appeal and the hint of a feminist attitude at a time when society was ready for this. As Lansbury had done for feminists of the middle class (and Merman before her for those of the working class), Daly offered feminists at the beginning of the 1990s the possibility to identify strongly with the character.

⁸⁹ Samelson, “From the Archives: Tyne Daly Took on Rose for the 30th Anniversary of *Gypsy*”.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Rothstein, “Man behind ‘Gypsy’ Prefers Now to Then.”

⁹² Ibid.

Then the new millennium brought yet another perspective through a new director, Sam Mendes, and a new Rose, Bernadette Peters.

4.1.4 Bernadette Peters – Just Too Sensitive

With the commercialization of the Internet at the beginning of the 1990s, third-wave feminism could enhance the movement by reaching a larger audience. According to Laura Brunell, “third-wave feminists sought to question, reclaim, and redefine the ideas, words, and media that have transmitted ideas about gender, gender roles, womanhood, beauty, and sexuality, among other things.”⁹³ Furthermore, Brunell writes, “The internet radically democratized the content of the feminist movement with respect to participants, aesthetics, and issues.”⁹⁴ This democratization made the claims of feminism publicly recognized, for example through the 1998 agreement of Mitsubishi Motor Manufacturing of America to pay \$34 million to settle an E.E.O.C.⁹⁵ lawsuit contending that hundreds of women were sexually harassed.⁹⁶ Others had an equal significance, like the year 2000 case United States v. Morrison, when the U.S. Supreme Court permitted victims of rape, domestic violence, etc. to sue their attackers in federal court.⁹⁷ According to Quinn, Hovick might have suffered domestic violence through her first husband.⁹⁸ In the Broadway musical *Gypsy*, this subject is only slightly touched in a humorous, but double-tongued way, during the first act before the “Mr. Goldstone” song. As Karen Abbott recalls, “To save

⁹³ Laura Brunell, *Feminism Re-Imagined: The Third Wave*, Britannica Book of the Year (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 2008). 197.

⁹⁴ Ibid. 196.

⁹⁵ E.E.O.C. stands for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission

⁹⁶ National Women’s History Alliance, “Timeline of Legal History of Women in the United States,” accessed January 5, 2020. <https://nationalwomenshistoryalliance.org/resources/womens-rights-movement/detailed-timeline/>.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ There is no proof of the truth of this claim. Quinn writes, “Rose would charge in her divorce papers that on that date Jack hit her threatened to murder her, and even choked her and that he had beaten her on numerous other occasions.” However, Quinn implies doubt when she writes, “If these events happened as stated, then they qualified as abuse.” See Quinn, *Mama Rose’s Turn – The True Story of America’s Most Notorious Stage Mother*. 50–52.

money, they would crowd everybody in the vaudeville act in one hotel room, and one of the hotel managers threatened to evict them, and in the musical, she cries rape and gets rid of the hotel manager that way.”⁹⁹ This scene might be understood as feminist, since Rose defends herself – at least *theoretically*, since the hotel manager did not actually try to abuse her. On the other hand, anti-feminists could interpret this scene to support their view that women often provoke such compromising situations and cry rape or claim abuse that did not happen. That is to say that *Gypsy* has many layers that could be interpreted very differently today from the time Laurents wrote this scene. Nevertheless, in *Gypsy*, the hotel manager did not abuse Rose. On the contrary, Rose is the portrayal of a mother who abuses her children, even if not sexually. In any case, since the beginning of the new millennium (and especially since the 2017 #MeToo movement), the subject of abuse and harassment has reached new dimensions of public awareness, and interpretations of the character Rose might take this discussion into account.

Hence, with the ongoing third wave of feminism putting women’s abuse more into the focus of the public eye, an innovative approach to the monster Rose was necessary. Presenting a mother pushing her children to become professional performers on stage needed to be “softened,” in the sense of presenting Rose more as a casualty of the circumstances that pushed her to do so, instead of portraying the horrible ultimate stage mother. In this view, the character Rose (and even Hovick) could be seen as a victim of the way her life turned out after her mother deserted her and she had two children, losing the chance to pursue her own career. Thus she wanted to do better for her girls – it was just the way she did it that was not right.

In 2003, forty-four years after its premiere (directed by Robbins) and after two revivals under the direction of Laurents, Sam Mendes became the director of *Gypsy*’s third revival in the new millennium. Mendes, “the glittering young British stage and film director who first caught Broadway’s attention with a luridly deconstructed ‘Cabaret,’ ”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Karen Abbott, interview by Paul Holdengräber, 2011. https://www.nypl.org/sites/default/files/av/transcripts/LIVEGypsyRoseLee_1.8Transcript.pdf. 30.

¹⁰⁰ Brantley, “Theatre Review; New Momma Takes Charge”

did not reinvent *Gypsy* as widely expected; but his Rose, Bernadette Peters, blazed a new trail.

According to Ben Brantley at the time, “Working against type and expectation under the direction of Sam Mendes, Ms. Peters has created the most complex and compelling portrait of her long career, and she has done this in ways that deviate radically from the Merman blueprint.”¹⁰¹ That was certainly part of Mendes’s intention when he chose to work with Peters as Rose. As Mendes confirms, “One of the main reasons I wanted to do the piece was to cast someone as Rose that was closer to Rose as she existed. She was a tiny woman. And she was a charmer. And so is Bernadette.”¹⁰² Peters’s appearance may have been comparable to Hovick, but she was repeatedly considered to be miscast as the character Rose.¹⁰³ Although Peters was fifty-five years old and, at this point, the oldest of all first-cast Roses on Broadway, it was not her age, but her actor’s personage (analyzed in chapter 3.1.2) that became responsible for the idea of her being miscast. “Peters is an actress-singer who can do cute and lovable. Absurdly, she tries it on here too,”¹⁰⁴ stated, for example, Charles Spencer from *The Telegraph*. Benjamin Ivry from *The Guardian* recapitulates all revivals until then by describing, “Later revivals of *Gypsy* starred Angela Lansbury, a fine actress without the requisite bellowing voice; Tyne Daly, a television actress with little voice; and a miscast Bernadette Peters.”¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, Matthew Murray writes that “even before the production began rehearsals, let alone performances, many people were saying that Peters was miscast in this role.”¹⁰⁶ Neither Peters’s actor’s personage nor her portrayal of Rose, merged well with the character that the general audiences and

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Jesse McKinley, “On Stage and Off,” *The New York Times*, no. February 8 (2002): <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/02/08/movies/on-stage-and-off.html?scp=1&sq=Bernadette+Peters%22&st=nyt>.

¹⁰³ Mordden, *The Happiest Corpse I've Ever Seen: The Last Twenty-Five Years of the Broadway Musical*. 191.

¹⁰⁴ Charles Spencer, “Gypsy Brings Bad Luck to Mendes,” *The Telegraph*, no. May 2 (2003), <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/drama/3593756/Gypsy-brings-bad-luck-to-Mendes.html>.

¹⁰⁵ Benjamin Ivry, “Patti LuPone Tops Ethel Merman’s *Gypsy*,” *The Guardian*, no. June 10 (2008), <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2008/jun/10/pattiluponetopplesethelmer>.

¹⁰⁶ Matthew Murray, “Gypsy in Her Soul,” *TheaterMania.com, Inc.*, no. August 20 (2003), https://www.theatermania.com/new-york-city-theater/news/gypsy-in-her-soul_3823.html.

critics expected, even though the production ran for 13 months and 451 performances.¹⁰⁷

On the contrary, Laurents once again spoke only in superlatives about Peters's unexpected interpretation of Rose – as he had done for every other Rose before. “In 2003, there was a new Rose alive on Broadway: Bernadette Peters,”¹⁰⁸ he recalled. “Brilliant, original, totally unlike the others. Well, each of the four was unlike the others. Unfortunately, the physical production in 2003 was misconceived and hurt the show more than people realized.”¹⁰⁹ Thus was it Mendes’s fault that *Gypsy*’s 2003 production was regarded as a failure? Laurents blames Mendes widely in his book *Mainly On Directing*: “No one in charge really knew much about Broadway musicals, including the director to whom all bowed.”¹¹⁰ However, remembering Mendes’s success with the television productions of *Cabaret* and *Company*, this is not fair to say. On the other hand, the perception of television production (even though taken from stage productions) cannot be the same as of *live* Broadway musical theatre. “No musical, no matter how good, can survive a misdirected, misconceived production, and this one was no exception,”¹¹¹ said Laurents, nevertheless. After directing two revivals, Laurents wanted “someone else to direct this one because I wanted to see what someone else would do; I hoped to be surprised. ‘Surprised’ was not the word for my reaction to what Sam Mendes did. ‘Surprised’ is a happy word.”¹¹² That said, Peters does not share Laurents’ judgment when she says, “Sam’s fantastic, he really is. He delves very deeply into the script, and there’s a lot of life on the stage.”¹¹³ Obviously, the opinions about this revival of *Gypsy* from inside the production were as contradictory as the critics’ and audiences’ receptions.

¹⁰⁷ The Broadway League, “Gypsy – A Musical Fable”.

¹⁰⁸ Arthur Laurents cit. in Bryer and Davison, *The Art of the American Musical – Conversations with the Creators*. 138.

¹⁰⁹ Arthur Laurents cit. in *ibid.* 138.

¹¹⁰ Laurents, *Mainly on Directing – Gypsy, West Side Story, and Other Musicals*. Pos. 14.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.* Pos. 15.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ Gans, “From the Archives: Bernadette Peters Joined the Sisterhood of Roses With the 2003 *Gypsy* Revival”.

Potentially, critics and the unsatisfied part of the audience were just not yet ready for a new conception of the musical and, thus, a new Rose. When Stacy Wolf writes that Peters had found a “vulnerable sexiness in the character,”¹¹⁴ she brings the problem to the point: *Vulnerability*, that ‘...hid just below the surface’,¹¹⁵ was (arguably) not something the female (and feminist) audience expected in the aftermath of third-wave feminism. As Elinor Burkett states, “In reaction and opposition to stereotypical images of women as passive, weak, virginal, and faithful, or alternatively as domineering, demanding, slutty, and emasculating, the third wave redefined women and girls as assertive, powerful, and in control of their own sexuality. In popular culture, this redefinition gave rise to icons of powerful women.”¹¹⁶ Consequently, portraying the character Rose showing her emotional weakness as much as the “monster’s craziness” could be considered by many in the audience as a misguided interpretation in a so-called misconception of the musical at the beginning of the new millennium. As especially her interpretation of “Rose’s Turn” shows,¹¹⁷ presenting Rose as vulnerable did not feel right at a time in which female society needed a continuing *pushing forward* of feminism. However, Peters’s Rose was not *wrong*, it was simply different from the others before. *Under the aspect of feminism*, her portrayal appeared at just the wrong time. Nevertheless, this debate confirms not only the strong feminist message of *Gypsy* and especially the character Rose but also how crucial this role’s interpretation is when it comes to the changing aesthetics in Broadway musical theatre. According to Friedmann, it was character-actress Lansbury whose “style and interpretation created a new vision of the role,”¹¹⁸ and “if it weren’t for Angela,

¹¹⁴ Stacy Wolf, “Gender and Sexuality,” in *The Oxford Handbook of The American Musical*, ed. Raymond Knapp, Mitchell Morris, and Stacy Wolf (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2011), 220.

¹¹⁵ Steven M. Friedman, *The Ultimate Broadway List Book* (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2016), 204.

¹¹⁶ Elinor Burkett. “The Third Wave of Feminism.” In Encyclopaedia Britannica. Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/feminism/The-second-wave-of-feminism>.

¹¹⁷ Peters’s interpretation of “Rose’s Turn” is subject of chapter 4.4, as is the case for all others.

¹¹⁸ Friedman, *The Ultimate Broadway List Book*. 105.

we wouldn't have all of the others.”¹¹⁹ In contrast, Brantley states that “only Ms. Peters...can be said to have broken the Merman mold completely.”¹²⁰ Both are right; times had simply changed.

Against all the odds, Peters wrote history by delivering an updated version of Rose. Indeed, Friedmann supports Brantley’s words when he says:

As an actress, you can’t be recognized as a champion of the Broadway musical until this role is tackled with success. Sadly the Broadway gossip mongers tried to degrade her [Peters’s] terrific performance, but it was dynamic and charismatic in ways her predecessors never did.¹²¹

Laurents considered this *Gypsy* revival in 2003 exclusively to be a misconception of Mendes. Nevertheless, it might also have been the strong feminist message of Laurents’s own creation that simply did not work at a time when women’s social status was suffering a backlash, especially during this period of post-third-wave feminism.¹²²

To keep up *Gypsy*’s legacy as “what may be the greatest of all American musicals,”¹²³ as Brantley declares, Laurents took back into his own hands the direction of the next revival only five years later, in 2008. This time, the character Rose was portrayed by Patti LuPone, as director Laurents recovered his original conception of the show.

4.1.5 Patti LuPone – The Fearless Feminist

Besides wanting to set things right concerning Mendes’s *Gypsy* conception, Laurents had a very personal reason to do another revival as early as 2008. According to LuPone, Tom Hatcher, his life partner of more than fifty years, had asked Laurents on Hatcher’s deathbed to direct

¹¹⁹ Ibid. 106.

¹²⁰ Brantley, “Theatre Review; New Momma Takes Charge”.

¹²¹ Friedman, *The Ultimate Broadway List Book*. 203.

¹²² Certainly, there are many reasons why shows succeed or fail. Also, the show premiered fewer than 20 months after the September 11 attacks in 2001, and the musical’s subject might not have found interest in these dramatic times.

¹²³ Brantley, “Theatre Review; New Momma Takes Charge”.

Gypsy to keep Laurents creatively productive, and it was his wish that LuPone should be Rose.¹²⁴ This request brought the new cast of the 2008 revival of *Gypsy* into rehearsal. At first, the almost ninety-year-old Laurents appeared to want to replicate the 1989 show with Tyne Daly “to stick with what worked,”¹²⁵ because he “wanted to make this *Gypsy* one he could be proud of.”¹²⁶ Nevertheless, at some point during rehearsals, he began *redirecting* his play, encouraging the actors to explore their roles.¹²⁷ “He went from trying to recreate *Gypsy* to ‘let’s see what happens,’” states LuPone, “... and what happened was this miracle: A whole new play emerged in Arthur’s eyes.”¹²⁸ LuPone describes the development of the 2008 revival in detail in her book *Patti LuPone – A Memoir*, and her words confirm the *refreshment* of the show. In fact, without changing anything of the book, the lyrics, or the music, and without replicating the 1989 revival as originally planned, the 2008 revival of *Gypsy* became the re-invention of an old classic by looking through the eyes of actors, creatives, and a 2008 audience. As Brantley wrote. “The 90-year-old Mr. Laurents, who directed two earlier revivals of *Gypsy* (with Angela Lansbury and Tyne Daly), has had nearly half a century to ponder characters he helped bring to life. The accumulation of decades seems only to have sharpened his vision of the fractured family at the show’s center.”¹²⁹ Along the same lines, John Lahr said that “the dynamic production is a conclusive answer to the British director Sam Mendes’ lethargic, miscast 2003 revival,”¹³⁰ and he cited Laurents, who said, “I wanted a ‘Gypsy’ seen in New York that was good.”¹³¹

Once again, critics spoke of Peters as being miscast. However, what was so different between Peters’s Rose and LuPone’s Rose, besides the vocal sound? It certainly was not a question of age, since LuPone is four-

124 LuPone and Diehl, *Patti LuPone – A Memoir*. 287.

125 Ibid. 288.

126 Ibid.

127 Ibid.

128 Patti LuPone cit. in ibid.

129 Ben Brantley, “Curtain Up! It’s Patti’s Turn at ‘Gypsy’,” *The New York Times*, no. March 28 (2008), <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/28/theater/reviews/28gyps.html>.

130 John Lahr, “Mother Load – Patti LuPone in ‘Gypsy’,” *The New Yorker*, no. March 31 (2008), <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/04/07/mother-load-2?verso=true>.

131 Arthur Laurents cit. in ibid.

teen months older than Peters. After Peters became the oldest Rose on Broadway in 2003, LuPone broke the record, portraying Rose at age 59. One risk taken by casting these performers was that the description of the character Rose is that of a middle-aged woman. Indeed, the events described in *Gypsy* happened in Hovick's life from the end of her twenties up to the age of forty. However, the time span defining "middle-age" had changed in the intervening years: While the U.S. Census lists the category "middle age" as stretching from 45 to 65,¹³² psychologist Erik Erikson defines this period as being between 40 and 65, following the young adulthood between approximatively age 18–40.¹³³ Thus Hovick was at the beginning of middle age (or the end of her young adulthood) when her life turned around, and Patti LuPone was at the *end* of this period. Certainly, approaching the age of sixty in 2008 was quite different than in 1930. Thus, fifty-nine-year-old LuPone could deliver a credible portrayal of a middle-aged woman in 2008. Moreover, this musical's leading role generally is supposed to be a part for an actress with a certain maturity (usually portrayed by an actress over 40) to be able to reveal all the layers of this complex character.¹³⁴ Thus it is a part LuPone was meant to play, as fans, friends, and colleagues had told her for over twenty years.¹³⁵

That said, LuPone's Broadway run in *Gypsy* came to life only with difficulties. After Brantley's critique about LuPone as Rose in the *Encores!* Production, the show moving to Broadway was compromised: "Contrary to what you might have anticipated, Ms. LuPone is less a Rose of billboard-size flair and ego than the sort of pushy but likable woman you might compete with at the supermarket for that last perfect sole

¹³² United States Census Bureau, "Social and Economic Characteristics of Americans During Midlife," accessed January 6, 2020. <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1981/demo/p23-111.html>.

¹³³ Saul Mc Leod, "Erik Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development. Simply Psychology," Simply Psychology, accessed January 6, 2020. <https://www.simplypsychology.org/Erik-Erikson.html>.

¹³⁴ As Sheldon Patinkin states, "... and their incredibly driven stage mother, Rose, the central character and a great vehicle for a mature star." See Sheldon Patinkin, *No Legs, No Jokes, No Chance – A History of the American Musical Theater* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2008). 337.

¹³⁵ LuPone and Diehl, *Patti LuPone – A Memoir*. 3.

fillet. (You'd lose, but you wouldn't hate her),"¹³⁶ wrote Brantley about LuPone's appearance in *Gypsy*'s Off-Broadway Production in July 2007. Possibly, Brantley was too attached to Laurents's early description of Rose as a monster when he wrote these words and it is not necessary to *hate* Rose. As LuPone corroborates, "What I saw in Rose was not the 'child-flattening maternal steamroller,' as *New York Times* reviewer Ben Brantley described her."¹³⁷ Serendipitously, Brantley revised his critique for the (very different) Broadway production: "While Rose may be a dauntingly single-minded creature, Ms. LuPone now plays her less on one note than any actress I've seen."¹³⁸ Obviously, on Broadway, he liked what he disliked in the summer Encores! version. Disliking that "[Ms. LuPone] has given us a human Rose, with doubts and a nagging tug of self-awareness,"¹³⁹ in 2007, in 2008, Brantley praised (especially) LuPone's interpretation of "Everything's Coming Up Roses" and "Rose's Turn" by saying that "you feel that you're watching a woman who has been peeled down to her unadorned id."¹⁴⁰ Brantley witnessed the portrayal of Rose's *vulnerability*, Rose's emotional weakness, Bernadette Peters's interpretation was criticized for. Referring to "a revelatory Bernadette Peters"¹⁴¹ in the same article, Brantley endorses my argument that Peters's interpretation just happened at the wrong time. LuPone was luckier: Contrary to 2003, feminism was getting up on its feet in 2008, the year Jennifer Baumgardner considers as the beginning of *the Fourth Wave of Feminism*.¹⁴² According to Baumgardner, "Much like the Third Wave lived out the theories of the Second Wave (with some surprising results), the Fourth Wave enacted the concepts that Third Wave feminists had put forth. [...] Transgenderism, male feminists, sex work, and complex relationships within the media characterized

¹³⁶ Ben Brantley, "What Ever Happened to Momma Rose?", *The New York Times*, no. July 16 (2007), <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/16/theater/reviews/16gyps.html>.

¹³⁷ LuPone and Diehl, *Patti LuPone – A Memoir*. 291.

¹³⁸ Brantley, "Curtain Up! It's Patti's Turn at 'Gypsy'".

¹³⁹ "What Ever Happened to Momma Rose?".

¹⁴⁰ "Curtain Up! It's Patti's Turn at 'Gypsy'".

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² Jennifer Baumgardner, "Is There a Fourth Wave? Does it Matter?", accessed January 15, 2020. <https://www.feminist.com/resources/artspeech/genwom/baumgardner2011.html>.

their feminism.”¹⁴³ Since 2003, things had changed for women in the United States: In 2005, Hillary Clinton was the first First Lady to be elected to public office, as a U.S. Senator from New York, and Condoleezza Rice was the first African-American female Secretary of State.¹⁴⁴ Nancy Pelosi became the first female speaker of the House in 2007, the year before Hillary Clinton became the first First Lady to run for president.¹⁴⁵ The empowerment of women advanced its fight against misogyny and cumulated in the beginning of the #MeToo movement in 2017.¹⁴⁶ “Because of the media advances and globalization, waves of mass change are coming faster and faster,”¹⁴⁷ states Baumgardner. “The waves are all part of the same body politic known as feminism, and combine to become a powerful and distinct force.”¹⁴⁸ Hence, the fourth Broadway revival of *Gypsy*, a musical about a strong, independent woman recognizing that “she was born too soon and started too late,”¹⁴⁹ represented in 2008 the path of all feminists, who might feel they were ever in a comparable situation. The musical was not about what Rose did wrong anymore, it was about the tragedy of missed chances. LuPone perceived Hovick as “an independent woman with large dreams at a time when women were not independent or allowed to dream such inconceivable things,”¹⁵⁰ and put this perception into her portrayal. Not being able to fulfill her desire for fame and success, Rose might have chosen the wrong way by transferring her obsession on her children, but at least she was not giving up. This *Gypsy* sent the message to the world that,

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ National Women’s History Alliance, “Timeline of Legal History of Women in the United States”.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ As early as 2006, two years before the 2008 revival of *Gypsy*, Tarana Burke used the phrase “Me Too” in the context of sexual harassment on social media. See Abby Ohlheiser, “The Woman Behind ‘Me Too’ Knew the Power of the Phrase When She Created it – 10 Years Ago,” *The Washington Post*, no. October 19 (2017), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2017/10/19/the-woman-behind-me-too-knew-the-power-of-the-phrase-when-she-created-it-10-years-ago/>.

¹⁴⁷ Baumgardner, “Is There a Fourth Wave? Does it Matter?”.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ This is a phrase from Rose’s monologue before the song “Rose’s Turn” in *Gypsy*, answering her daughter asking her why Rose had pushed her children to become stars. See Laurents, *Gypsy – A Musical Fable*. 2–6–52.

¹⁵⁰ LuPone and Diehl, *Patti LuPone – A Memoir*. 291.

contrary to Rose and despite backlashes and emotional breakdowns, feminists had become unstoppable.

As opposed to the 2003 revival, *Gypsy* found a more understanding audience in 2008, and so did LuPone's portrayal of Rose. Even though the character Rose admits at the end of the musical, "I guess I did do it for me,"¹⁵¹ it is crucial to recognize that she never puts herself into the spotlight. When, as early as in act 1 scene 2, Rose says, "It ain't for me! It's for my girls. It's too late for me,"¹⁵² she already sees the bigger picture and sends out a strong feminist message: The character Rose wants a better life for her daughters – as all feminists want a future of independence and opportunities for their daughters.

The feminist message is one thing, but there is also the messenger to consider. Even if the audience had been more accessible to Peters's interpretation, focusing as it did on a woman and mother blinded in her actions by sorrow and hunger, she might not have been able to transport the feminist message the way LuPone did. Peters's actor's personage corresponds more to the girliness of the third wave, which was, after all, slowing down in 2003. In contrast (and as shown by the analysis in chapter 3.1.1), in 2008, the well-known fearlessness and outspoken attitude of LuPone's actor's personage harmonized with the upcoming fourth wave's feminism and LuPone's actor's personage, as loved by her audience and many critics, merged as perfectly with the character Rose as Merman's had done. Moreover, it was LuPone's belt voice, often compared to Merman's, that merged as perfectly as Merman's with the portrayal of Rose. It was "Patti's Turn,"¹⁵³ as Brantley said. Peters's Rose had paved the way for LuPone's, as the third wave of feminism had paved the way for the fourth.

Over the period of 49 years between 1959 and 2008, contrasting Roses sent a strong feminist message into the world: From a working-class idol to a middle-class image, up to a middle-class icon, Rose stays a feminist character in changing times. According to Friedmann, "*Gypsy* just needs a powerhouse performance. The book and the score

¹⁵¹ Laurents, *Gypsy – A Musical Fable*. 2-6-55.

¹⁵² Ibid. 1-2-8.

¹⁵³ Brantley, "Curtain Up! It's Patti's Turn at 'Gypsy'".

are so strong that just with the right character in place by a skilled musical actress, *Gypsy* can be re-invented again and again.”¹⁵⁴ As Laurents echoed, “If the show is good, you should look at it with the eyes of the period in which you are living.”¹⁵⁵ Thus what makes *Gypsy* a classic is that it changes without changing. While the original work of Styne, Sondheim, and Laurents remains unchanged, the performer’s interpretation takes responsibility for the development of *Gypsy* and its leading character. When Wolf states that “the midcentury American musical is a feminine yet active cultural form that does not locate a woman as a passive, to-be-looked-at object, but allows her to take up the position of self-spectacle,”¹⁵⁶ she characterizes the Broadway Belt, in tandem with the character she portrays in such a musical, as being truly feminist. More than that, she confirms the necessity of musicals that are able to value the Broadway Belt, in other words, *diva musicals*. According to Millie Taylor, characters like Rose display women with “(masculine) qualities of determination, independence and assertiveness, and though each assumes certain aspects of a woman’s social role (wife, mother, lover, career), their prominence in the narratives and their overshadowing of the men in these narratives turns on its head the gender expectations of both musicals and society.”¹⁵⁷ Thus the question arises: If only the last “survivors” of the 20th century’s Broadway divas, as true feminists, could be the right choice to portray Rose, then who carries the torch for the Broadway Belt? Is there a next generation of Broadway divas and diva musicals?

To find possible answers to these questions, the next chapter will discuss the difference between the 20th century’s Broadway divas and those of the 21st – today’s performers who grew up in show business during the changing aesthetics in Broadway musical theatre and the difficulties of casting the right Rose for *Gypsy*.

¹⁵⁴ Friedman, *The Ultimate Broadway List Book*. 69.

¹⁵⁵ Arthur Laurents cit. in Bryer and Davison, *The Art of the American Musical – Conversations with the Creators*. 136.

¹⁵⁶ Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria – Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical*. 23.

¹⁵⁷ Taylor and Symonds, *Studying Musical Theatre – Theory and Practice*. 148.

4.2 Portraying Rose – The Diva Musical in the Need of a Diva

In the chapters before, I showed how crucial the character Rose is as a feminist portrayal. According to Robinson, Rose is a role “considered by many to be the crowning achievement of an actress’ musical theatre career, and certainly the choicest of roles for ‘women of a certain age.’”¹⁵⁸ Thus portraying Rose needs a mature actress, completely understanding the character, as Lansbury says. However, for a more realistic portrayal insofar as it corresponded to the age of Hovick, a younger Broadway musical performer would be a better choice. Since Louise’s sister June eloped at age thirteen,¹⁵⁹ Rose could be easily portrayed by an actress in her mid-thirties or forty at most. Nevertheless, it is easier for the audience to perceive Rose as a three-time divorcée, one whose daughters are portrayed by two young professional actresses, when the role is filled by a mature actress with a mature belt voice. Additionally, *Gypsy* is still a star vehicle, and the portrayal of Rose needs a star able to carry the show and sell tickets.

Even so, a new revival with a younger Broadway belter could be possible, if the aforementioned up-and-coming Broadway belter has diva qualities. As mentioned, at the time of *Gypsy*’s premiere in 1959, Merman was fifty-one years old and still the biggest Broadway star with a loud, mature belt voice, and *Gypsy* was a star vehicle more or less tailored for her.¹⁶⁰ Inevitably, Merman set the standard for all Roses to come, which is probably one reason why Rose today is still portrayed by “women of a certain age.” However, a Broadway belter of the younger generation might attract a younger audience, one which is crucial to preserve “classics” like *Gypsy* and *Hello, Dolly!* into the coming decades and beyond.

Such a “younger” audience has existed since the 1990s, the time of third-wave feminism, which is certainly no coincidence. According to

¹⁵⁸ Robinson, “Ethel and Angela and Patti, Oh My! Who is the Fiercest Rose of All?”

¹⁵⁹ Robert Simonson, “June Havoc, Stage Star Whose Life Became Legend in *Gypsy*, Died at 96,” *Playbill*, no. March 28 (2010), <https://web.archive.org/web/20100604022252/http://www.playbill.com/news/article/138252-June-Havoc-Stage-Star-Whose-Life-Became-Legend-in-Gypsy-Dies-at-96>.

¹⁶⁰ Chapter 3.3.2 discusses the relationship between Merman’s actor’s personage and her roles.

David Savran, “Surveys show that since the opening of *Rent* in 1996, the Broadway audience has become not only richer but also younger. The number of spectators under twenty-five has grown from 20.9 percent to 23.9 percent, while the number between the ages of thirty-five and forty-nine has declined from 31.8 to 25.1 percent.”¹⁶¹ These numbers confirm the necessity to look for a younger performer to portray Rose, not just for a younger audience, but also to recover the audience around age 40. This audience might identify more readily with a Rose more their age than with one portrayed by a performer around the age of 60.

However, “casting politics” makes it difficult to cast a younger Broadway belter for the part of Rose, because most female musical performers up to their forties – or at least their mid-thirties – are generally cast to portray much younger characters. Likewise, leading parts portraying schoolgirls or young students, such as in *Wicked*, *Legally Blond*, *Hairspray*, *Mean Girls*, and *Heathers*, are usually played by experienced, professional Broadway musical performers who are over 25 and into their mid-thirties or at least going on 30.¹⁶² There are plenty of examples in original Broadway casts: Idina Menzel played Elphaba in *Wicked* in 2003 at age 32; in 2002, 29-year-old Marissa Jaret Winokur portrayed school student Tracy Turnblad in *Hairspray*; Laura Bell Bundy appeared as UCLA student Elle Woods in the 2007 production of *Legally Blond* at age 26; Emily D. Skeggs was the Medium Alison in her first year in college in *Fun Home* (2015) at age 25; Erika Henningsen portrayed Cady Heron in *Mean Girls* in 2018 at age 26, and Caissie Levy became the original 21-year-old Elsa in 2018’s *Frozen* at age 37.

Portraying Rose in her mid-thirties would demand casting child performers for the roles of Louise and June in *Gypsy*. (Sandra Church and Lane Bradbury, portraying Louise and June in the original Broadway cast, were twenty-one years old when *Gypsy* premiered.) However, that would not be a problem, since there are many talented, even

¹⁶¹ David Savran, “Class and Culture,” in *The Oxford Handbook of The American Musical*, ed. Raymond Knapp, Mitchell Morris, and Stacy Wolf (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 247.

¹⁶² For this and the following information about Broadway musicals and their respective performers, see <https://www.ibdb.com>.

trained *Broadway Kids*¹⁶³ in New York and elsewhere. Also, Louise's (discrete) strip would not be a case for child protection, since some famous models began their careers at the age of thirteen (for example, Chanel Iman¹⁶⁴) at times even with much fewer clothes on than Louise at the end of her strip.

Nevertheless, since 1959 no younger Broadway Belt has ever portrayed Rose on Broadway, because *Gypsy* is what John Clum calls a "diva musical: a show that glorifies its female star."¹⁶⁵ Although the word *star* is often misused in today's television- and pop culture, "the *Broadway musical star* is still defined by multiple achievements through talent, and that over life-long careers," to cite me from chapter 3.2. Consequently, to carry a diva musical like *Gypsy*, a Broadway Belt has first to become a star. Although Broadway musical history shows that stars can be *born* through leading-lady parts in new Broadway musical productions – as was LuPone at age 30 through *Evita*, 22-year-old Streisand through *Funny Girl*, Peters through *Mack and Mabel* at age 26, and Jill Haworth at age 21 as *Cabaret*'s Sally Bowles – even this is not enough: the Broadway Belt portraying Rose needs to be a *diva*, not only a star. As Holley Replogle-Wong explains:

The solution for all four [*Gypsy*] revivals was to cast another diva possessing a similar larger-than-life persona, but with a different voice and acting style to bring to the role. *Gypsy* has since [1959] become a vehicle for other stars, an opportunity for them to reinvent Madame Rose. Only a woman of a certain age and status can do Rose, and it [the role] is a challenge to her divahood. To the fan, the character in the drama matters less than the opportunity to see how the star will take on the role.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶³ *The Broadway Kids*, is the name of a concert group made up of children from age 8 to 16, having performed on Broadway and published eight CDs of Broadway tunes. However, from among the many "Little" Cosettes in *Les Misérables*, to all Matildas and Annies, can be found enough young girls to portray Louise and June at age thirteen.

¹⁶⁴ Chanel Iman, "Chanel Iman," accessed April 10, 2020. <https://web.archive.org/web/20101128064511/http://www.chaneliman.com/about-me/>.

¹⁶⁵ Holley Replogle-Wong, "Stars and Fans," in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*, ed. Raymond Knapp, Mitchell Morris, and Stacy Wolf (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). 386.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid. 386.

Certainly, in 1959, the audience primarily went to see *Gypsy* for Merman, the recognized Broadway star *singer*, and her celebrated belt voice; but, subsequently, she was particularly praised for her *acting* in the role. Lansbury was a recognized character actress and already a Broadway *star* through her rendition of Mame when she portrayed Rose in 1974. The audience knew that she could act, but was surprised by her belting abilities, especially after Merman had originated Rose with her exceptional belt voice. In 1989, curiosity was certainly driving energy for the audience to want to see how Daly, well-known as television-series character Detective Lacey, could transmute into Rose; although her singing abilities were criticized, her “younger” and “sexier” rendition was praised.¹⁶⁷ The positive voices about Peters’ performance (that became gradually louder until the end of the show’s run) confirm that the character matters and that new interpretations are possible, while the vocal rendition through an elite Broadway Belt stays necessary. When LuPone portrayed Rose in 2008 in line with her own vision of the role, her interpretation, as far as the acting was concerned, resembled Peters’s, but her belt voice was comparable to Merman’s. Thus, acting *and* belting matter in the portrayal of Rose, not only the star behind the role.

Nevertheless, Replogle-Wong is right when she restricts her opinion to “fans.” When Clum states, “women spectators can find a strong figure in an actor and character of their own gender,”¹⁶⁸ he confirms how crucial a star’s rendition of a character like Rose is for the star’s fans. Although he implies that audiences can discover a strong figure in *any* actress portraying Rose, this is not quite the whole story: The audience expects to see not only a star but a *diva*, “who reached stardom through her talent *and* her actor’s personage,” as discussed in chapter 3.

¹⁶⁷ Like Lansbury, Daly is an actress, not a singer. Obviously, singing quality mattered more in 1989 than in 1974. It would be interesting for further research to dig deeper into the question of whether, during the rock age of the 1970s, “good” singing was less important for Broadway musical theatre than before and after this era, but to answer this question is not part of my subject.

¹⁶⁸ John Clum cit. in Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria – Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical*. 22.

According to Mark Steyn, “larger-than-life,” divas are “imposing spectacular women stars,”¹⁶⁹ and Clum concurs that “feminine assertiveness and survival are hallmarks of a diva.”¹⁷⁰ Thus becoming a diva necessitates being a star and, consequently, the circle is closed for any unknown or even less known actress to portray Rose on Broadway. Unfortunately, Broadway musical theatre’s landscape suffered a substantial change during the 1960s – and even more since the 1990s – that made it difficult for any promising belting actress to grow into the business and to become a star – not to mention a diva. As Dennis McGovern and Deborah Grace Winer state, “With 1968’s *Hair* and the rock musical began the disintegration of the orderly, hierarchical business of the American musical theatre.”¹⁷¹ Rock musicals were, first of all, loud, and amplification of a voice was not used to reinforce the voice of triple threats while they were dancing, like in *West Side Story*; it was used to be heard over electric rock-guitars and heavy drum sets. Susan Watson remembers, “After *Hair* came in, I was ready to retire. I thought, ‘I can’t play guitar. That’s it for me in show business. What’s left for a soprano?’”¹⁷² McGovern and Winer add:

Hair and the shows that followed, with their “let it all hang out” approach to the craft, broke those ties to ritual and tradition. But the shows were very popular. Broadway entered a schizophrenic period with the revival of *No, No, Nanette* in 1971. Traditional, original musicals were out. All that was being produced were nostalgia shows or rock spectacles.¹⁷³

Musicals like *Grease* jumped on the nostalgia-for-the-fifties train and became “a phenomenon, with one of the biggest repeat audiences of any show ever on Broadway.”¹⁷⁴ Besides these nostalgia shows and rock musicals, shows like *A Chorus Line*, *Chicago*, and *Ain’t Misbehavin’* were

¹⁶⁹ Mark Steyn cit. in *Changed for Good – A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*. Pos. 4570.

¹⁷⁰ John Clum cit. in ibid. Pos. 4575.

¹⁷¹ Dennis McGovern and Deborah Grace Winer, *Sing out, Louise! – 150 Broadway Musical Stars Remember 50 Years* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1993). 206.

¹⁷² Susan Watson cit. in ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid. 207.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid. 209.

born to reinvent Broadway musical theatre after the death of the classical book musical. In this era, there was no place for stars or star vehicles, and even less for divas and diva musicals.¹⁷⁵

Nevertheless, *Gypsy* survived and became a huge success in its 1974 revival with Lansbury. She was a diva who had become a star in 1966 with *Mame*, just two years before the invasion of *Hair*. Obviously, in a time when “traditional musicals were out,” a *true diva* was still able to carry *Gypsy*, one of the last book musicals, into the future of Broadway musical theatre.

In the 1980s, Broadway musical theatre as an original American art form had to suffer through the so-called *British invasion*. The battle-ground had been prepared as early as 1971 by Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *Jesus Christ Superstar*. According to McGovern and Winer, the show “introduced a modus operandi that foreshadowed the way the blockbuster British imports would unalterably change the Broadway landscape a decade later.”¹⁷⁶ *Jesus Christ Superstar* appeared first as a recording in 1970 in the entertainment business – with Deep-Purple singer Ian Gillan as Jesus and Murray Head as Judas – and “was selling briskly in the United States,”¹⁷⁷ as Stephen Citron states. He explains further:

Now, in order to quell all the pirated theatrical performances, unauthorized productions of *Jesus Christ Superstar* that were springing up by any group who could afford to buy a recording, Stigwood decided to stage the show on Broadway. ... the recording reached Number One on the Billboard charts and (by the time the show opened) had sold over three million copies. This, coupled with much advertising plus controversy from religious groups, some of whom thought the idea was heresy, others who thought it was bringing religion into the twentieth century, kept the box office at the Hellinger jingling. By the time it opened, *Jesus Christ Superstar* had chalked up the biggest advance in history – a million dollars.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁵ The most remarkable exceptions are three Tony winners: Bernadette Peters in 1975 in *Mack and Mabel*, Angela Lansbury in *Sweeney Todd* in 1979, and Patti LuPone in 1980 for *Evita*. All three of them also portrayed Rose in *Gypsy*.

¹⁷⁶ McGovern and Winer, *Sing out, Louise! – 150 Broadway Musical Stars Remember 50 Years*. 209.

¹⁷⁷ Citron, *Sondheim and Lloyd-Webber – The New Musical*. 187.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid. 187–188.

Hence, besides the money made through the recording, the budget of US\$750,000 for the Broadway show was already covered before the first tone was played or lyrics sung on a Broadway stage.¹⁷⁹ As McGovern and Winer claim, this was “the start of a trend that was the kiss of death of the American musical tradition.”¹⁸⁰ Appearing as Judas in the 1977 revival of *Jesus Christ Superstar* became Patrick Jude’s Broadway debut,¹⁸¹ but later he complains sadly:

Webber’s best work came in the early years. But now, you go to the theatre, and forgive me, but what you see is a great make-up job; you have to listen to lip synching and prerecorded music. I resent that. The Phantom is onstage for twenty-one minutes – and a lot of that is prerecorded. That’s not Broadway.¹⁸²

Jesus Christ Superstar in 1971 was just the beginning of this development, but the 1974 revival of *Gypsy* already was feeling the consequences: Despite Lansbury being successful as Rose, *Gypsy* had only a limited run of four previews and 120 performances on Broadway, while the original production of 1959 had played two previews and 702 performances. Even a proven Broadway star, a true diva in a diva musical, could not prevent star theatre from dying.

When in the 1980s the invasion of British imports rose, these musicals quickly monopolized Broadway musical theatre. For example, *Les Misérables*, created by playwright Alain Boublil and composer Claude-Michel Schönberg, played for over sixteen years, from its premiere March 12, 1987, nonstop until May 18, 2003.¹⁸³ The musical counted a total of 50 previews and 8,167 performances on Broadway through September 4, 2016, the day of the last show of its second revival, which played “only” 22 previews and 1,024 performances.¹⁸⁴ However,

¹⁷⁹ Ibid. 187.

¹⁸⁰ McGovern and Winer, *Sing out, Louise! – 150 Broadway Musical Stars Remember 50 Years.* 209.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Patrick Jude cit. in ibid. 209–210.

¹⁸³ The Broadway League, “*Les Misérables*,” accessed January 24, 2020. <https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-production/les-misrables-494837>.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

it did better than the first revival, which happened during the global financial crisis, from November 9, 2006, to January 6, 2008, with 17 previews and 463 performances.¹⁸⁵ Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Cats* ran for nearly eighteen years nonstop, from October 7, 1982, to September 10, 2000, and counts a total of 31 previews and 8,078 performances through December 30, 2017, the closing day of its first revival, which played "only" 16 previews and 593 performances (see chapter 3.2.5).¹⁸⁶ Not to mention Webber's *The Phantom of the Opera*, which opened January 26, 1988, and is currently still running, counting sixteen previews and 13,310 performances as of January 24, 2020.¹⁸⁷ The then-new subgenre of megamusicals left little space to build new Broadway stars to follow in the footsteps of the elite Broadway belters of the 20th century.

Martin Vidnovic, who portrayed Jud Fry in the 1979 revival of *Oklahoma!*, recalls the past: "Alfred Drake and Ethel Merman and Mary Martin were theatre stars, stars that Broadway made. But it was a different kind of theatre then. So how do you make a star? Now, Andrew Lloyd Webber's the star or you have ensemble shows."¹⁸⁸ Nevertheless, as the very modest number of revivals of these shows demonstrates, at the beginning of the 1990s "the tide ... definitively turned away from the British shows of the 1980s."¹⁸⁹ An exception is certainly *Phantom*, whose leading parts are usually played by singers with classically-trained voices. "I think maybe the day of the British musical is dead,"¹⁹⁰ echoes Vidnovic. "It was purely a financial thing, and now they're having their problems, too. Maybe now we'll get back to shows that are about people."¹⁹¹ However, during the 1980s, very few Broadway stars were born on Broadway.¹⁹² As mentioned, the "Broadway musical situation" was so

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ The Broadway League, "Cats".

¹⁸⁷ "Phantom of the Opera," accessed January 24, 2020. <https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-production/the-phantom-of-the-opera-4491>.

¹⁸⁸ Martin Vidnovic cit. in McGovern and Winer, *Sing out, Louise! – 150 Broadway Musical Stars Remember 50 Years*. 214–215.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid. 215.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid. 208.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² The most notable exception in the 1980s is first-time Tony winner Jennifer Holliday in *Dreamgirls* (1982).

bad that on June 2, 1985, at the 39th Annual Tony Awards, *no Tonys* were attributed for the categories of *Best Performance by a Leading Actress in a Musical* and *Best Performance by a Leading Actor in a Musical*.¹⁹³ As McGovern and Winer observed about this period, “Broadway seems to have stopped producing theatre stars. If a ‘star’ performer is needed, producers usually look to movies and television. Performers no longer go from show to show. Careers are no longer built in theatre.”¹⁹⁴ So the second *Gypsy* revival in 1989 was cast with television series star Tyne Daly.

While Daly was certainly an excellent choice to promote feminism in Broadway musical theatre, she was not one of “the last survivors of Broadway’s star theatre” and *Gypsy* was just her second Broadway show. As a well-known television star, she could sell tickets for this revival during a difficult era for Broadway musical theatre. However, this could not guarantee enough success from the beginning, as the casting of a Broadway diva probably would have. As Daly states, “The reason that we toured first was because the producers wanted to make their money back before we tried Broadway. That’s how it works.”¹⁹⁵ Daly’s television celebrity helped to promote the Broadway revival, illustrating the reversed relationship between television and Broadway compared to the 1950s when television needed Broadway to present subjects that mattered: According to Darryl Kent Clark, to cure a lack of *substance* in early television, “television producers hired Broadway writers, directors, and actors to create quality programming content for television programs... Weekly programs, particularly *The Ed Sullivan Show* (1948–1971), exposed audiences to Broadway stars and proven Broadway productions.”¹⁹⁶ At this time, the Broadway *star* and the *proven* Broadway show came first. This situation changed when, from the 1960s on, television audiences became more interested in “television dramas

¹⁹³ Morrow, *The Tony Award Book – Four Decades of Great American Theater*. 260.

¹⁹⁴ McGovern and Winer, *Sing out, Louise! – 150 Broadway Musical Stars Remember 50 Years*. 214.

¹⁹⁵ Tyne Daly, interview by Jim Colucci, 2007. <https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews/tyne-daly?clip=86739#about>. Chapter 6 at 13 min. 35 sec.

¹⁹⁶ Darryl Kent Clark, “New Media and Technology – Broadway and Television in the New Media Age,” in *Broadway: An Encyclopedia of Theater and American Culture*, ed. Thomas A. Greenfield (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Press, 2009). 401.

and situation comedies crafted specifically for the small screen.”¹⁹⁷ Now, Broadway musical theatre on television became an event instead of weekly entertainment; for example, Frank Loesser’s *The Most Happy Fella* (1980) and Sondheim’s *Sunday in the Park with George* (1986), both recorded at full length during their Broadway run.¹⁹⁸ By its 30th anniversary, *Gypsy* was successful *again* and brought Daly her unique Tony for portraying Rose – in a time when American musical theatre was nearly dying, and the star vehicles and diva musicals (except for successful revivals like *Gypsy*) were already dead.

In the aftermath of the British invasion developed another curiosity on Broadway: the *corporate musical*. Although Walt Disney’s first stage production *Beauty and the Beast* in 1994 made a lot of money at the box office, it was “pooh-poohed by the critics and denied the major Tonys,”¹⁹⁹ as John Kenrick notes. However, Disney’s successful project was inevitable in a time when original Broadway enthusiasts could not keep Broadway alive on their own. According to Kenrick, in this period “Less than five percent of the American public was attending the theatre on a regular basis, and most people went for years without even hearing a showtune.”²⁰⁰ Consequently, *Beauty and the Beast* attracted people and their children who were completely uninterested in Broadway musical theatre, but loved Disney, and this brought a lot of money in. As Robert McTyre, producer of *Beauty and the Beast*, stated:

We are bringing a new way of thinking to the theatres, both creatively and business-wise. On the creative end, the show is a very collaborative effort with many more people involved and contributing than usual. And, on the business side, we bring financial discipline.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ John Kenrick, “History of the Musical Stage: The 1990s I: Corporate Musicals,” accessed January 27, 2020. <https://www.musicals101.com/1990bway.htm>.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Robert McTyre, cit. in Michael Lassell, *Disney on Broadway* (New York: Disney Editions, 2002). 28.

Although Broadway musical theatre was always a commercial form of American theatre, the genre was no longer about being *theatre*²⁰²; it all became a question of money. Disney's triumph came in 1997 with *The Lion King*, the biggest hit of the 1990s.²⁰³ As co-composer Mark Mancina mused:

I think one of the most interesting things about our approach to this musical is that none of the composers are Broadway theater people, so we are drawing upon our varied past experiences. We are not thinking in terms of "this is how a musical is done." We are thinking in terms of how we want to do it.²⁰⁴

High-priced tickets were not a problem for a completely different audience than the usual Broadway community: upper-middle-class families and more and more visiting tourists. The show was sold out for a year and, as of January 19, 2020, is still running after 33 previews and 9243 performances.²⁰⁵ Even worse than with the megamusicals of the 1980s, "no one cared who was in the cast – more than ever, the show was its own star,"²⁰⁶ as Kenrick points out. Thus, compared to the 1970s and 1980s, there was even less chance to build new stars and to protect the erosion of the status of the Broadway Belt as a true Broadway diva.

Nevertheless, after Daly's success in the 1989 revival of *Gypsy*, at least two divas from the "good old days" before the mega- and corporate musical were able to cling to their star and diva status: Chita Rivera, with her appearance in *Kiss of the Spider Woman* in 1993, earning her the second Tony in her career, and Bernadette Peters, nominated in 1993

²⁰² As Wolf writes, "In the commercial theatre of Broadway, whether a show runs for a month, a year, or a decade depends solely on ticket sales." See Wolf, *Changed for Good – A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*. Pos. 154. However, if the musical production's *corporation* is making money, for example by selling toys, CDs and DVDs, the visibility on Broadway might be more important than a sold-out show. See Jonathan Burston cit. in ibid. Pos. 154, footnote 6.

²⁰³ Kenrick, "History of the Musical Stage: The 1990s I: Corporate Musicals".

²⁰⁴ Mark Mancina cit. in Lassell, *Disney on Broadway*. 65.

²⁰⁵ The Broadway League, "The Lion King," accessed January 27, 2020. <https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-production/the-lion-king-4761>.

²⁰⁶ Kenrick, "History of the Musical Stage: The 1990s I: Corporate Musicals".

for her portrayal of Paula McFadden in *The Goodbye Girl* and winning also her second Tony in the 1999 revival of *Annie Get Your Gun* as Annie Oakley, one of Merman's most celebrated parts. Although Annie Oakley is more an up-and-coming diva role (as categorized in chapter 3.3.1), Peters stepped into the footsteps of Merman with this part and confirmed her diva status. Now, she was ready to become Rose. Although Peters's interpretation (and especially Sam Mendes's direction) was not to everyone's taste, it was the right move to bring *Gypsy* into the new millennium, since she was (and still is) a "woman of a certain age" and a true diva – both considered necessities to portray Rose.

In fact, it would have been difficult to find a younger true diva than Peters in 2003. Even though Peters did not win a Tony for portraying Rose, she was nominated – and she had already won two Tonys before. As of this date, only a few names of next-generation Broadway belters have appeared on the lists of Tony Awards nominations and winners.²⁰⁷ For example (as partially mentioned in chapter 3.4), Lea Salonga won a Tony as Kim in *Miss Saigon* in 1991; Faith Prince received one for portraying Miss Adelaide in the 1992 revival of Frank Loesser's *Guys and Dolls*; Bebe Neuwirth walked into the footsteps of Chita Rivera in the 1997 revival of *Chicago*; Alice Ripley was nominated for *Side Show*, but won her first Tony in the next decade for *Next to Normal* in 2009; Karen Ziemba, nominated for *Steel Pier*, won a Tony for Best Featured Actress in 2000 for *Contact*; and Sutton Foster became a Tony winner as Millie Dillmount in the 2002 revival of *Thoroughly Modern Millie*. Christine Ebersole was a Tony winner as Dorothy Brook in the 2001 revival of *42nd Street*, won another Tony in 2007 for *Grey Gardens*, and went on to be nominated in 2017 for *War Paint*, in which she appeared side by side with Patti LuPone, also nominated for this show. Even though this list is not complete (and even though it grew beyond expectations as it was written), Broadway's diva problem is obvious: These actresses had their biggest success primarily in revivals and the few new musicals on

²⁰⁷ See <http://tonyawards.com>.

the list were not successful enough to be revived on Broadway anytime soon, if ever.²⁰⁸

However, Broadway's "diva situation" becomes even worse when, in 2004, one year after *Gypsy*'s third revival, "*Wicked* reinvents the Broadway diva for the twenty-first century,"²⁰⁹ as Wolf declares. Through *Wicked*, thirty-three-year-old Idina Menzel, who had already belted out on Broadway as Maureen Johnson in *Rent* in the late 1990s, instantly became a new type of Broadway diva, transformed "from a larger-than-life force to an everyday girl."²¹⁰ As Wolf explains, "By presenting an ordinary personality in an extraordinary singer, *Wicked* invites young female spectators' identifications and attachments."²¹¹ Thus, only a year after thirty-year-old Marissa Jaret Winokur won a Tony for her portrayal of the up-and-coming diva role Tracy Turnblad in *Hairspray*, Menzel, portraying Elphaba, brought again to the stage the younger version of a Broadway diva. Both lead characters are young girls who "experience the typical challenges of adolescence – of identity formation, of social acceptance, of success, of loneliness, of loyalty and the challenges of friendship – all issues to which girls readily relate,"²¹² writes Wolf. Although Menzel's success for belting out "Defying Gravity" defines her as a Broadway Belt, her diva status is not comparable to the divahood of the 20th century's Broadway Belt. True divas of this era, like Merman and LuPone, reached stardom through their talent and their actor's personage, while Menzel maintains offstage more the image of a modest person. I agree with Wolf that it is only Menzel's performance that makes her a diva.²¹³ Initially, her everyday-girl image

²⁰⁸ For example, *Steel Pier*, created by the usually successful team of John Kander and Fred Ebb, closed after 33 previews and only 76 performances; *Grey Gardens* reached 33 previews and 307 performances; *Next to Normal* came up to 21 previews and 733 performances and *Contact* played 31 previews and 1010 performances. The megamusical *Miss Saigon* played 19 previews and 4092 performances between April 11, 1991, and January 28, 2001; nevertheless, *Miss Saigon*'s revival between March 2017 and January 2018 was much less successful, with 24 previews and 340 performances; <http://www.ibdb.com>.

²⁰⁹ Wolf, *Changed for Good – A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*. Pos. 4582.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Ibid. Pos. 4589.

²¹² Ibid. Pos. 4584. Wolf's argument concerns Glinda and Elphaba in *Wicked* but is equally valid for Tracy.

²¹³ Ibid. Pos. 4584–4597.

built her divahood on stage, but at the end of her Broadway run in *Wicked*, it also confirmed the star-diva's "very extraordinary ordinariness."²¹⁴ *Wicked* is still running on Broadway, with many great belters having performed as Elphaba since Menzel appeared for the last time on January 8, 2005. Thus many "everyday divas"²¹⁵ with their respective fans are out there in the world, and Menzel's divahood is just a relic of the past – at least until she appears again on a Broadway stage with a comparable belting role to that in *Wicked*. Menzel became the *divine one* uniquely in the original meaning of "diva," which "concentrates on the brilliant performer equipped with talent not everybody can achieve," as quoted in chapter 3. According to Wolf, "for *Wicked* girl fans, [...] the important markers of 'sincerity and authenticity' – requisite star qualities that Richard Dyer notes – are, for *Wicked*'s divas, that she is 'cute,' 'funny,' 'sweet,' and 'nice.'"²¹⁶ Clearly, these attributes cannot be those of a diva as LuPone is or Merman was. As described in chapter 3.3, the elite Broadway Belt of the 20th century was and is as much a diva on- as offstage. Leading ladies of diva musicals became true divas, even if they did not want to, as LuPone always insists (see chapter 3.3.2). Consequently, when Wolf says that, "young fans use the diva to navigate daily life, to understand themselves better, and to feel confident in themselves,"²¹⁷ she speaks exclusively about everyday divas. To summarize, an everyday diva relies on an audience that identifies with her for being unassuming, a "normal" girl, giving the girl-fan self-confidence that she, too, could possibly become a star playing a diva role. On the contrary, a true diva is admired by the audience for portraying an unconventional character, a Big Lady role, or a character nobody in the audience would like to identify with, and she becomes even more celebrated for appearing offstage as "the kind [of women] who makes you sit up and take notice in a good way."²¹⁸

²¹⁴ Ibid. Pos. 4503.

²¹⁵ Expression as used by Wolf; see ibid. Pos. 4597.

²¹⁶ Ibid. Pos. 4755.

²¹⁷ Ibid. Pos. 4665.

²¹⁸ Ralph, *Redefining DIVA – Life Lessons from the Original Dreamgirl*. Pos. 155.

Hence, when Peters portrayed Rose in 2003, her girlishness corresponded perfectly to the *Zeitgeist*²¹⁹ of the beginning of the 21st century but collided with Peters's "certain age" in portraying Rose. One audience saw the true diva in a diva role and loved her interpretation of Rose, but others were looking for the everyday diva, based on Peters's "forever-cute" image, her actor's personage that did not correspond to the character Rose. As an elite Broadway Belt and approved true diva, however, Peters could not fulfill the Cinderella-like social construct of an everyday diva, despite her image.

Until LuPone played *Gypsy* (at age 59 going on 60, as mentioned) in 2008, some promising Broadway belters had solidified their position as Broadway stars of the next generation but only as everyday divas in the context of their stage appearance. Without an actor's personage with true diva attributes, and with no corresponding diva roles in new musicals available, they portrayed primarily parts without show tunes or memorable melodies. They had no chance to build a legacy and they even had no song to belt out that needed exceptional talent like "Defying Gravity." According to Kenrick, in 2007–2008, "Broadway had just offered a full season in which no successful new musical featured traditional showtunes,"²²⁰ noting that "those were heard in a series of popular revivals."²²¹ Thus the five nominations for the 62nd Tony Award for Best Performance by a Leading Actress in a Musical consisted of three revivals: *Sunday in the Park with George*, *South Pacific*, and *Gypsy* – the last of these bringing another "last survivor" her second Tony, Patti LuPone. Since that 2007–2008 season, Imelda Staunton has won a Laurence Olivier Award – London's counterpart to New York's Tony – for her portrayal as Rose in the West End's *Gypsy* in 2016, but the production was not transferred to Broadway in 2018, as announced.²²² As praised as her rendition of Rose was, Staunton is not a *Broadway* diva, and a

²¹⁹ Just to remember that the "riot-grrrl" [sic]-based third-wave feminism of the 1990s continued into the 2000s and some of the most successful schoolgirl musicals appeared in the new millennium.

²²⁰ John Kenrick, "History of the Musical Stage: 2000–2009 Part II: Tourist Traps," accessed January 28, 2020. <https://www.musicals101.com/2000obway2.htm>.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Adam Hetrick, "Imelda Staunton *Gypsy* Planning Broadway Transfer," *Playbill*, no. November 25 (2016), <https://www.playbill.com/article/imelda-staunton-gypsy-planning-broadway-transfer>.

62-year-old actress (three years older than LuPone when she portrayed Rose in 2008) *debuting* on Broadway portraying a mother of two teenage girls might be just too much of a *fable*.

Thus, if LuPone is the last true Broadway diva, and her successors only everyday divas, Broadway musical theatre is clearly lacking true divas. After two decades of the 21st century, there exists no new diva musical comparable to *Gypsy* that could confirm a star's quality and turn her away from her everyday divahood into a mature, true Broadway diva. Any exception that might have existed, has been lost in the hype about megamusicals, Disney productions, and jukebox shows. As the last *Hello, Dolly!* revival from April 20, 2017, to August 25, 2018, shows, the audience *wants* to see true divas in a diva musical. People obviously admired 72-year-old Bette Midler, who won a Tony for her performance as Dolly, replaced by Bernadette Peters as Dolly at age 70. In 1964, Carol Channing originated Dolly at age 43 – a more realistic age for a widow actively interested in getting remarried in the 1880s, the time the musical's story plays. However, Channing is also one of the true divas of the 20th century, appearing on stage at a "certain age" and beyond: as mentioned, she portrayed Dolly in two revivals, in the 1978 and 1995 Broadway seasons, and when the second revival closed on January 28, 1996, Channing prepared to celebrate turning 75 three days later. Finally, it is crucial to remember Merman closing the original production as Dolly on December 27, 1970, at age 62. This trend continues in 2020 with LuPone turning 71 about four weeks before she was scheduled to portray²²³ Joanne in *Company*'s third staged revival since its premiere in 1970.²²⁴ In contrast, Sutton Foster (age 45) is cast as Marian Paroo, an attractive young lady somewhere in her twenties,²²⁵ in the revival of *The Music Man*, planned to premiere in October 2020.²²⁶ While appearing beside Hugh Jackman is certainly a crucial step in her career, the char-

²²³ Caused by the Coronavirus, Broadway theatres closed during previews in 2020. *Company* premiered December 9, 2021.

²²⁴ Beside these staged revivals, two performances of a concert staging of the show happened on April 11 and 12, 1993. See The Broadway League, "Company," accessed January 29, 2020. <https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-show/company-2719>.

²²⁵ Music Theatre International, "Casting – Character Breakdown," accessed January 29, 2020. <https://www.mtishows.com/full-cast-info/517>.

²²⁶ *The Music Man* premiered February 10, 2022, due to the worldwide Coronavirus crisis.

acter Marian would demand a younger musical performer and is usually sung with a classically-trained voice. By taking over this part, Foster remains a “cute,” “sweet” everyday diva and, at age 46, does not move towards becoming a true Broadway diva with a mature belt voice. At the planned premiere date, Sutton will be two years older than Channing when she originated Dolly – and two years older than Daly when she portrayed Rose. The generation gap cannot be overlooked.

Except for Foster, Salonga, Winokur, and Menzel, all the abovementioned Broadway belters under 70 will be over 55 years old in 2020, the age at which Peters portrayed Rose in 2003, and approaching their sixties, LuPone’s age playing Rose in 2008. Although they are all called “divas” for their talent, the biographies of this “younger” generation of divas mostly lack having *originated* diva roles on Broadway. Without a diva role to identify with and to be identified with, it will be difficult for the audience and the critics to recognize one of these performers as an elite Broadway Belt in a way comparable to the iconic Broadway leading ladies of the 20th century. If Rose remains a diva role for a “woman of a certain age,” one or two of these might be lucky to reinforce their *artistic* diva image through the next *Gypsy* revival. However, offstage, they will probably remain everyday divas in their “extraordinary ordinariness,” contrary to, for example, LuPone speaking out and belting out as she has done throughout her career.²²⁷ As Marches states in a 2019 interview, “There’s also the plain fact that to see LuPone at maximum, commanding intensity — her default mode — is to see that most thrilling and increasingly rare of theatrical sights: a true diva.”²²⁸

Again, the generation gap cannot be wiped out. On the contrary, a younger Broadway Belt might still have a chance to *become* a *true diva* who is growing out of her girlish image to become the leading lady of a brand-new diva musical – or, by portraying Rose. Casting a younger

²²⁷ Besides some of LuPone’s outbursts already cited, she did not hesitate to call Webber a “jerk” and a “sad sack,” even “the definition of a sad sack” in the *New York Times Magazine* interview in 2019. See Patti LuPone cit. in David Marchese, “Patti LuPone on Getting Bullied by Broadway. And Why She Keeps Coming Back,” *The New York Times Magazine*, no. October 21 (2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/10/21/magazine/patti-lupone-broadway-company.html>.

²²⁸ Ibid.

musical performer than usual as Rose would give the audience the chance to discover a new *true diva*, and there might be creatives thinking about writing a musical especially for her. Mark Steyn asks quite cynically, “How can you have larger-than-life characters with smaller-than-life actresses?”²²⁹ but LuPone is more on the mark when she states, “They used to write for stars, and they don’t anymore...But I don’t think it’s over...I am blown away by the talent onstage in New York.”²³⁰ When Stacy Wolf demonstrates, through the example of *Wicked*, how girl fans of musicals “carry the torch of the form’s continuation and its ongoing reinvention as a vehicle for female empowerment,”²³¹ she ratifies my argument again, that the reinvention of star vehicles is an unavoidable necessity. Going even further, I would emphasize the urgency of creating new *diva musicals* comparable to *Gypsy* to re-integrate the elite Broadway Belt as the pillar of Broadway musical theatre. Only then can Broadway musical theatre, as one of the most crucial cultural forces in the United States, be part of sustaining and representing feminism (and anti-racism) in the time of fourth-wave feminism and a growing collaborative action for racial justice.²³² Only new diva musicals can underline the Broadway belter’s impact of gender, ethnicity and social order, and only a diva role can metamorphose an everyday diva into an *authentic* true diva the audience will be proud to call *Broadway diva* for the rest of her career and far beyond.

Mark Robinson defines in 2019 *The 7 Qualities That Define a Broadway Diva*:²³³ Triple-Threat-Talent, A Distinctive Singing Voice, A Larger-Than-Life Personality, An Opportunity of a Diva Moment, Staying Power, Tony Awards, and That “Je Ne Sais Quoi.”²³⁴ Even though star

²²⁹ Mark Steyn, *Broadway Babies Say Goodnight – Musicals Then and Now* (New York: Routledge, 1999). 243.

²³⁰ Marchese, “Patti LuPone on Getting Bullied by Broadway. And Why She Keeps Coming Back.”

²³¹ Wolf, *Changed for Good – A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*. Pos. 534.

²³² For example, See Ruthie Fierberg, “Broadway for Racial Justice Demands Collaborative Action to Protect Black, Indigenous, People of Color in Theatres Nationwide,” *Playbill*, no. June 10 (2020), <https://www.playbill.com/article/broadway-for-racial-justice>.

²³³ Mark Robinson, “The 7 Qualities That Define a Broadway Diva,” *Showtickets.com*, no. April 3 (2019), <https://broadway.showtickets.com/articles/the-7-qualities-that-define-a-broadway-diva/>.

²³⁴ Ibid.

theatre is supposed to be dead, Broadway musical theatre *needs* its *true* Broadway diva. Robinson explains the *je ne sais quoi*:

Finally, and this should not be underestimated, a true diva has an X factor, or that “*je ne sais quoi*” that simply comes from within. It’s that little something extra that cannot be defined, but most certainly can be felt when we are in the presence of it. A performer may have one, two, or even all of the ingredients on this list, but without this final one, the true mantle of “diva” cannot be bestowed.²³⁵

In line with Robinson, I would argue that, additionally, the true Broadway diva *needs* a diva musical with a character offering the possibility to put that “*Je Ne Sais Quoi*” on stage – whether she is a triple threat, actress, or singer. Broadway musical theatre needs to put unique female characters like Rose back at center stage; characters that give every Broadway Belt space to put her personal divadom into the role – contrary to recent musical portrayals of Tina Turner, Cher, or Donna Summer and the necessity to copy them as truthfully as possible: As *divine* as the respective performers might portray these pop stars, the imitator can never become as much of a diva as the original pop star.

When Huegel assumes that a diva creates a second career as a cultural symbol, besides the publicly known, talented, and successful star²³⁶ (as cited in chapter 3), it needs to be acknowledged that such a “cultural symbol” cannot come into existence, if the character to portray is (or was) already a celebrated diva role. To become a diva, the Broadway Belt needs a unique role she can interpret in its entirety through her own divadom and her own talent and skills. Portraying the character Rose in the musical *Gypsy* is not just telling the story of a stage mother pushing her daughters on stage. Rose is a much more complex character who has *issues*: Deserted by her mother, she flees from her childhood, marrying far too young; in the following years, she escapes from three unhappy relationships, then finds herself a single parent of two girls in a miserable life, stuck with her father. Deceived by men, the char-

235 Ibid.

236 Huegel, “Diva.” 161.

acter Rose puts, from this moment on, all her energy into her role as a mother who wants a better life for her daughters, hoping she, Rose, can be a part of it, too.

These layers of the character Rose are the subject of the next chapter, discussing different possibilities for interpreting this figure.

4.3 Acting in *Gypsy*: Between Femininity and Motherhood

Before I analyze the song “Rose’s Turn” and the respective belter’s interpretation in chapter 4.4, this chapter concentrates on the acting aspect of the character Rose. According to Foster Hirsch, theatre director and producer Harold Prince realized that “the performance of a musical has to protect its stylized activities of singing and dancing.”²³⁷ Hirsch continues:

Acting in musicals has evolved its own conventions, which are different from those for straight plays. When it is not well done, a musical-theatre performance can seem tinny and hollow; solid musical-theatre acting, on the other hand, should not have the same weight as acting in a drama: different from if not always larger than life, musical acting is acting in a frame, performing with traces of self-consciousness. Creating a character in a musical comedy or musical drama requires supercharged energy and size – going out there and selling musical theatre itself.²³⁸

There is certainly little doubt about the performer’s self-consciousness when portraying Rose. Every Broadway Belt integrates her actor’s personage and her interpretational choices into the character. However, the performer is not the only one searching for the “inner Rose.” According to Millie Taylor, audience members “are recreating the experiences of the characters in their own minds and bodies.”²³⁹ Thus the audience identifies with the character or, in the case of an unsympathetic char-

²³⁷ Harold Prince cit. in Hirsch, *Harold Prince and the American Musical Theater*. 88.

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Taylor and Symonds, *Studying Musical Theatre – Theory and Practice*. 243.

acter, might reject the identification and feel disgusted. Taylor adds that “the observer actually experiences the actions and feels the emotions of the performers and can become passionately connected to song, dance, and characters.”²⁴⁰ As a consequence, if the actress portrays the character convincingly, and her emotions expressed through song, dance and acting correspond to those of the character, the audience might identify with the character and the performer simultaneously.²⁴¹ This can only happen if the performer is acting *well*. Answering the question of how to recognize good acting, Deer and Dal Vera write:

We know it when we see it, or, even more likely, excellent acting is so transparent that we are unaware we’re seeing it at all and simply become involved in the character’s experience without thinking of acting.²⁴²

Combining Taylor’s and Deer and Dal Vera’s comments, the character Rose would be well-portrayed when the audience perceives the character and the performer as being one and the same; thus, in the eyes of the audience, the performer’s emotions (expressing the character Rose’s feelings through acting, singing, and dancing) would precisely correspond to the emotions of the character Rose (as created by the playwright Arthur Laurents). In this case, for the audience, Rose and her emotions become as *real* as the performer – as real as the original Rose Hovick (even though Laurents changed the story and the character of Hovick substantially to make the character Rose more interesting and to fit Merman). The fictionalized form of musical theatre (the “frame” Hirsch is speaking about) does not change the fact that the audience perceives Rose as a person that really existed, resurrected by the (well-acting) performer.²⁴³

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Even if the spectator cannot identify with the character – for example, if the character is immoral – he or she might, nevertheless, experience a certain fascination for the “villain” and, thus, for the performer.

²⁴² Deer and Dal Vera, *Acting in Musical Theatre – A Comprehensive Course*. 8.

²⁴³ Some spectators might not be conscious that the character is based on a real person. However, this is usually written in the program and, in any case, some of the audience will be aware that this show is based on the memoir of the real Gypsy Rose Lee.

While there is a danger that show numbers – otherwise realistic characters bursting into song – could destroy this “reality,” the musical-theatre-loving audience is aware they are watching a musical and is ready to adapt their view of reality to accommodate characters expressing themselves in this way. Such songs have an essential function in the advancement of the storyline. For example, in *Gypsy*, “Let Me Entertain You” has multiple reprises and *frames* the whole plot by serving as the opening number when June and Louise are children, as well as the rhythmically transformed striptease number of Louise (adopting Gypsy Rose Lee as her new stage name and persona) near the end of the musical. Also, “You Gotta Have A Gimmick” can be perceived as simply a comedy number; however, Louise attentively watches the strippers explaining that, rather than *talent* (something Louise believes she does not have, saying as early as in act 1, scene 9, “Well, I don’t have any talent.”²⁴⁴), all one needs for success is one trick or device, however cosmetic, that makes a strip special. This song, then, builds a foundation under Louise’s decision to do a strip number herself in the following storyline: Rose might have pushed her onto the burlesque stage, but Louise obviously is curious if she, (supposably) possessing no talent, can be successful, too, but on her own terms. This becomes clear the moment she sees herself in the mirror dressed up like a lady, saying “Momma ...I’m pretty ... I’m a pretty girl, Momma!”²⁴⁵ Thus a story about a real woman well-portrayed by a performer, combined with show numbers framing the story,²⁴⁶ is the mixture diva musicals, particularly *Gypsy*, are made of.

Even if the musical is generally referred to as *Gypsy*, its complete title is *Gypsy: A Musical Fable*.²⁴⁷ Since Laurents did not create a realistic portrayal of Hovick and her children, this title change was a concession to make to Hovick’s daughter June.²⁴⁸ According to Quinn, “June claimed

²⁴⁴ Laurents, *Gypsy – A Musical Fable*. 1-9-56.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Rose’s songs, especially, frame the character in the story, which I discuss later in this chapter.

²⁴⁷ The Broadway League, “Gypsy – A Musical Fable”.

²⁴⁸ Quinn, *Mama Rose’s Turn – The True Story of America’s Most Notorious Stage Mother*. Pos. 194.

to be ‘upset’ that the story created by Laurents was *not* the story of her childhood at all.”²⁴⁹ After a “sabotage campaign against the show’s plotline,”²⁵⁰ Havoc was calmed by altering the title to *Gypsy: A Musical Fable*.²⁵¹ According to Clum, “it was Havoc’s lawyer, Louis Nizer, who insisted that the show be subtitled “A Musical Fable.”²⁵² However, Laurents later said, “three-quarters, however, was invention – which was why I called the show a fable,”²⁵³ and would take credit for this idea.²⁵⁴

In any case, *Gypsy: A Musical Fable* (shortly called *Gypsy* ever since) became widely recognized by every Broadway Belt who portrayed Rose. For example, LuPone states:

Rarely does the company ever sit around the table and read the play. And only rarely is the script from a musical worth the time. *Gypsy* was and is worth reading again and again. There is so much to discover the scenes are layered and new ones. The characters are complex and conflicted, Rose most of all. Many called it the greatest American musical. Certainly it’s got the greatest book of any American musical.²⁵⁵

Other performers have also cited the role as a landmark in the career of a musical theatre artist. Going into rehearsals for the second revival of *Gypsy* in 1989, Daly said she hoped to be able to “claim this character as my own and become part of the history of the play, adding my name to the sisterhood of the actresses who have given Rose a try.”²⁵⁶ Not to mention Peters, claiming Rose to be “one of the greatest roles ever written with one of the greatest scores and one of the greatest books.”²⁵⁷

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Ibid. Pos. 204.

²⁵¹ Ibid. 215.

²⁵² Clum, *The Works of Arthur Laurents – Politics, Love, And Betrayal*. 36.

²⁵³ Laurents, *Mainly on Directing – Gypsy, West Side Story, and Other Musicals*. 57.

²⁵⁴ Clum, *The Works of Arthur Laurents – Politics, Love, And Betrayal*. 36.

²⁵⁵ LuPone and Diehl, *Patti LuPone – A Memoir*. 289.

²⁵⁶ Samelson, “From the Archives: Tyne Daly Took on Rose for the 30th Anniversary of *Gypsy*”.

²⁵⁷ Gans, “From the Archives: Bernadette Peters Joined the Sisterhood of Roses With the 2003 *Gypsy* Revival”.

Consequently, the importance of *acting* in portraying Rose is probably as much of a necessity as being able to belt out *Gypsy*'s songs. "Acting Rose" implies seeing the character as a woman and as a mother. For this reason, I analyze these aspects of the role separately.

4.3.1 Mama Rose – Too Much of a Mother

Ever since Laurens said to Merman, "This woman is a monster,"²⁵⁸ the portrayal of Rose almost universally has been approached at first sight as being the notorious stage mother. However, portraying the maternal side of Rose demands examining the character's multiple layers as a mother. According to Susan C. W. Abbotson, "Mama Rose flees her father and her familial responsibilities for a life on the road. But ironically she does so by taking her daughters along with her, which is to say she creates an alternative family model. She is still their mother, "ostensibly providing for their welfare."²⁵⁹ Rose never leaves any doubt that she loves her children and wants to protect them²⁶⁰ – even when her wish to see them succeed in show business becomes predominant and blinds her to aspects of their well-being. In act 1, scene 2, when Louise asks Rose why she eats dog food and not chow mein like her daughters, Rose replies, "Because you two did the work."²⁶¹ Rose leaves the more nourishing food to them, simultaneously saving "every cent"²⁶² to get "just enough saved for scenery and costume."²⁶³ Additionally, even though she is portrayed throughout the musical as neglecting Louise in favor of June, Rose shows her devotion to both of her children in act 1, scene 9, when she refuses Grantziger's offer to let June have acting lessons, but not Louise: "My daughters are my job and I got two of them!"²⁶⁴

²⁵⁸ Citron, *Sondheim and Lloyd-Webber – The New Musical*. 87.

²⁵⁹ Susan C.W. Abbotson, *Modern American Drama: Playwriting in the 1950s: Voices, Documents, New Interpretations*, ed. Brenda Murphy and Julia Listengarten (New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2019). 148.

²⁶⁰ Of course, it can be argued that none of Rose's actions are entirely selfless.

²⁶¹ Laurens, *Gypsy – A Musical Fable*. 1-2-7.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Ibid. 1-2-8.

²⁶⁴ Ibid. 1-9-54.

Rose will not leave Louise behind in favor of June's career.²⁶⁵ Even after selling Louise for a strip act ("My daughter can do it"²⁶⁶ in act 2, scene 4), Rose still tries to protect her when she says: "Just remember – you're a lady."²⁶⁷ Thus those who say that the character Rose is nothing but a monster mother may not be allowing for her attempts to be a better mother than her own, who left young Rose behind to pursue a life in show business without her daughter.²⁶⁸ Rose just assumes her children will love show business as much as she does – and that they will love life in show business together with her, as much as the child Rose would have loved to live such a life alongside her mother.

In fact, Rose is not completely wrong, as long as the show remains a real child act, and while June, Louise, and the boys still are children. There is nothing in the script suggesting that the children do not like to perform, at least not until act 1, scene 9, when June declares, "It's a terrible act and I hate it! I've hated it from the beginning, and I hate it more now."²⁶⁹ However, June's reaction is not truthful. Even though she might be conscious that the act is terrible, she wants to become a star and is just furious that Rose does not accept Mr. Grantziger's offer to send her to school (*June*: "Mr. Grantziger could make me one [a star] if –"²⁷⁰). Contrary to Louise, June never wants a normal life and demonstrates this at the end of act 1 by running away with Tulsa, one of the boys from the child act, to do a club date in Kansas City.²⁷¹

Louise is not unhappy either about being in show business, but her motivation is very different: She just wants to be noticed by her mother. First, by expressing her wish not to play a boy on stage anymore when she asks, "Can I wear a dress?"²⁷² – hoping that Rose might see her like she sees her sister June, as a pretty little girl. Then – when Louise states she believes she has no talent (as mentioned before) –, she claims not

²⁶⁵ Certainly protecting Louise here also protects Rose from being left behind.

²⁶⁶ Laurents, *Gypsy – A Musical Fable*. 2-4-33.

²⁶⁷ Ibid. 2-4-39.

²⁶⁸ "Rose: I want my girls to enjoy themselves and travel like Momma does! Father: And you'll leave them just like your mother left you! Rose: Never!" See *ibid.* 1-2-9.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.* 1-9-57.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.* 1-9-56.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.* 1-11-68.

²⁷² *Ibid.* 1-7-39.

to care about it, saying it is her mother's judgment that matters: "I don't mind really – except Momma would like it better if I did."²⁷³ She confirms her motivation again at the beginning of act 2 during rehearsals for a new act: "Momma, I love you so much, I've tried hard as I could. The act is rotten and I'm rotten in it."²⁷⁴

However, her motivation begins to change when Rose convinces her in the same scene, that she, Louise, could be a star like her sister. Louise finds self-confidence and claims, "If I'm the star, it should be: Louise and Her Hollywood Blondes."²⁷⁵ Finally, when Louise sees herself in the mirror, wearing an evening gown for the first time, just before her first strip act, Laurents describes her becoming "very grand, very proud, very beautiful."²⁷⁶ He continues, describing, "As Louise sings she seems to get more confidence, even to begin to enjoy herself. And her voice finally rings out true and clear."²⁷⁷ This Louise evolves and begins to pursue success for her own sake, rather than for her mother's. Even though it is not always obvious throughout the story, Louise and June might love show business – they only want to get past the child act and to have control of their own paths – but Rose misses the moments to let go; first, when she refuses Mr. Grantziger's offer to send June to school,²⁷⁸ then, when Louise has become the famous stripper Gypsy Rose Lee.²⁷⁹

The fact that Rose pushes the children into continuing the child act as teenagers might give the impression she was a bad mother from the beginning, but she might be simply desperate. Asking Cratchitt, "How are Louise and I supposed to live?"²⁸⁰ Rose expresses her fear of finding herself and Louise without income if June goes to school. Since Rose considers managing her daughters to be her job (a job she declares

²⁷³ Ibid. 1-9-56.

²⁷⁴ Ibid. 2-1-4.

²⁷⁵ Ibid. 2-1-10.

²⁷⁶ Ibid. 2-4-39.

²⁷⁷ Ibid. 2-4-41.

²⁷⁸ "Rose: He's trying to take my baby away from me, that's what he's trying to do! Well, over my dead body, he will!" See *ibid.* 1-9-55.

²⁷⁹ "Louise: It's my life! And I love it! I love every second of it and I'll be damned if you're going to take it away from me! I AM Gypsy Rose Lee! I love her – and if you don't, you can clear out right now!" See *ibid.* 2-5-48. Original emphasis.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 1-9-54.

she does “damn well!”²⁸¹), and she has never worked otherwise, she cannot see a solution other than continuing. And, since Louise is not as clearly talented as June, the child act’s star, Rose cannot let go of June, since, without June, there would be no act anymore and she and Louise would be lost; this concerns Louise’s welfare as much as Rose’s own. Rose desperately wants a better life as she had, for both of her children. In act 1, scene 2, Rose makes this clear when she says to her father, “I’ll be damned if I’m gonna let them sit away their lives like I did. Or like you do – with only that calendar to tell you one day from the next!”²⁸² For Rose, making her children into actresses is the only way out – for her children and, at the same time, for her. As Abbotson states, “Like gypsies, actors live bohemian lives, which is to say they are free: free to be different, independent, unorthodox, self-expressive and hedonistic.”²⁸³ Rose dreams about such a life for herself. However, she obviously loves her children too much to pursue her own career, leaving them behind. Consequently, she offers them an actor’s life and just wants to be part of it.

Knowing that the children are mostly happy to live that life, at least until their success fades, calling Rose’s behavior selfish does not show a complete understanding of this complex character. Primarily, she refuses to realize her children have become too old to do a child act. Rose is a good mother, but misguided due to her own childhood and rabid ambition for her daughters, and she absolutely oversteps when she suggests to the stage manager in the burlesque theater that Louise could replace the star-spot stripper, without first asking Louise. Her desperation has turned into an obsession with any opportunity that shows up. When Abbotson claims: “Rose is rather like Brecht’s Mother Courage whose economic obsession alienates friends and leads her makeshift family into dangers which ultimately destroy it,”²⁸⁴ she is right to a point, but Rose’s obsession is not economic; it is about *success and recognition*. Since she considers her own life to be one of missed chances and possi-

²⁸¹ Ibid.

²⁸² Ibid. 1-2-10.

²⁸³ Abbotson, *Modern American Drama: Playwriting in the 1950s: Voices, Documents, New Interpretations*. 149.

²⁸⁴ Ibid. 148.

bilities, Rose is looking for recognition as a mother by finding success for Louise – any kind of success, even “only in second rate burlesque,”²⁸⁵ as she finally admits. Eventually, by trying too hard to be a good mother and to make her children stars, Rose has destroyed her family.

These different layers of the character Rose, on the one hand a monster parent and on the other a caring but misguided mother, and as a woman guided by equal parts desperation and obsession, are crucial for the interpretation of each Broadway Belt who crafted her unique portrayal of the character. Merman did not really give many comments about her choices in the role. It was, first of all, a new part for her in a new Broadway show that should push her career. As she said in her memoirs, “I loved the idea of doing a role like this from the moment Laurens described the character. He sent me a draft of the script and I knew immediately that Mamma Rose was an actress’s dream.”²⁸⁶ As mentioned before, Merman, the singer, searched for recognition as an actress. Her approach to the character was principally a more practical one since she had enormous experience at this point in her life in how to *sell* a show. As Mordden states, “In terms of job description, Merman was not an actress, though she maintained a confident delivery of banter and plot development alike.”²⁸⁷ Nevertheless, there are signs that Merman did not see Rose as a monster mother. According to Flinn, Merman as Rose refused to say to her on-stage father to “go to hell” in act 1, scene 2.²⁸⁸ She also did not want to say “I guess I did do it for me,”²⁸⁹ after “Rose’s Turn” (act 2, scene 6). “It would make her Rose awful, a monster,”²⁹⁰ explains Laurens. Flinn adds, “That was something Merman was loath to do. The team had to convince Ethel that the line was pivotal to unlocking both the show and her character.”²⁹¹ In her 1978 memoirs, Merman explains how she saw Rose:

²⁸⁵ Laurens, *Gypsy – A Musical Fable*. 2-4-34.

²⁸⁶ Merman and Eells, *Merman*. 202.

²⁸⁷ Mordden, *The Happiest Corpse I've Ever Seen: The Last Twenty-Five Years of the Broadway Musical*. 191.

²⁸⁸ Flinn, *Brass Diva: The Life and Legends of Ethel Merman*. 302.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

²⁹⁰ Arthur Laurens cit. in ibid.

²⁹¹ Ibid.

After the tryout in Philadelphia, *Gypsy*²⁹² came backstage and said, ‘You made me cry.’ I was pleased, because many people thought Rose was selfish and self-centered. But the way I saw it was that she wanted everything for her two girls. It wasn’t that *she* wanted to be a star. She says in ‘Rose’s Turn,’ ‘It was for you June … It wasn’t for me, Herbie.’ Only after the kids didn’t need her anymore did she say that now it was her turn – ‘You either got it or you ain’t’ – but that was because she was very upset. Mamma Rose [sic] sacrificed her whole life, gave up the love of her life for Louise and June. That’s why when I played her, I got sympathy. People cried.²⁹³

Whether Merman described her interpretation in the same way in 1959, remains undiscovered. Merman wrote these words in her 1978 biography, four years after Lansbury’s successful appearance as Rose in *Gypsy*’s 1974 revival. Certainly, Merman wanted to make a point concerning Lansbury’s different interpretation of Rose as a character actress, since Laurens and Sondheim had cheered Lansbury’s performance, raving “We saw our show for the first time.”²⁹⁴ Nevertheless Sondheim commented on Merman’s interpretation of “Everything’s Coming up Roses,” saying, “Little did we know that she was a *wonderful* actress, which only made the moment richer.”²⁹⁵ However, this compliment may be seen as an exception, or a change of heart, for Sondheim, since, he had described Merman in the context of her acting abilities as a “talking dog.”²⁹⁶ In any case, Merman’s original interpretation was praised by audiences and critics, and since she originated the character, for every successor the comparison with her was inevitable.

Accepting the part of Rose in *Gypsy*’s first revival, Lansbury strongly manifested her intention to present a completely different interpretation from Merman’s. Knowing that she would not be able to belt out Rose’s songs like Merman, Lansbury said she needed “to find a core of

292 The original *Gypsy* Rose Lee.

293 Ethel Merman cit. in Merman and Eells, *Merman*. 205.

294 Keith Garebian, *The Making of Gypsy* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1993). 123.

295 Stephen Sondheim cit. in *ibid.* 82.

296 Arthur Laurens, *Original Story By Arthur Laurens – A Memoir of Broadway and Hollywood* (New York: Applause Theatre Books, 2001). 378. And: Secrest, *Stephen Sondheim – A Life*. 136.

honesty in the part, instead of playing a caricature of the stage mother.”²⁹⁷ She ruminates that “‘Rose’s Turn’ tells the entire history of Rose’s desire for her girls to succeed,”²⁹⁸ and continues:

When they succeed, it was a terrible blow to her. Instead of getting the pat on the back, *they* got it. And that’s what ‘Rose’s Turn’ is about: ‘Someone tell me when is it my turn.’ That’s really the line, and the reason she coached and shoved her girls ahead of her. She couldn’t do it, so she had them do it, and yet when they did, they took away the one thing she wanted more than anything else: to be counted for herself.²⁹⁹

As cited before, Lansbury considers her interpretation to be a “total understanding of the character.”³⁰⁰ Her interpretation of this part was certainly that of a professional actress, but that does not make the *singer* Merman’s interpretation less credible. As Mark Robinson states, “It is impossible for anyone to hear Merman insist that ‘everything’s coming up roses’ or that this time’s ‘for me’ without believing she will have her dream, and god help anyone who gets in her way.”³⁰¹ Sondheim’s agent Flora Roberts simply said: “It was goose bumps with Merman and tears with Lansbury.”³⁰² The times and Broadway’s musical theatre aesthetics had changed between these two interpretations, but the question of how to interpret Rose remains the same.

In 1989, Tyne Daly brings other aspects to Rose’s motherhood. “Rose is so remote from her children,”³⁰³ she states, “She is mostly performing for them and manipulating them. She *loves* them dearly; it doesn’t mean she doesn’t love them. They are her whole life.”³⁰⁴ Being remote from her children is certainly a different aspect of Rose’s motherhood

²⁹⁷ Angela Lansbury cit. in Garebian, *The Making of Gypsy*. 121.

²⁹⁸ Angela Lansbury cit. in Peikert, “Angela Lansbury Reflects on Her Performance of ‘Rose’s Turn’ in *Gypsy*”.

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

³⁰¹ Robinson, “Ethel and Angela and Patti, Oh My! Who is the Fiercest Rose of All?”.

³⁰² Garebian, *The Making of Gypsy*. 123.

³⁰³ Tyne Daly cit. in Samelson, “From the Archives: Tyne Daly Took on Rose for the 30th Anniversary of *Gypsy*”.

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

since usually Rose is described as being obsessed with her children – in other words, as being *too* close. What Daly means by “remote” is a sort of shortsightedness that can be understood by looking into the musical’s book. For example, when Rose ignores Louise’s desire to sleep in Rose’s bed as June is allowed to do (act 1, scene 2), she does not recognize Louise’s similar need to be near to her. Louise tries to convince Rose, saying, “June says you said she can sleep with you tonight.” She hopes to be treated equally to June, but Rose just answers, “You know how high strung the baby is after a performance,” pushing her away. “I performed,” protests Louise, but Rose still does not see Louise’s need for maternal attention: “It ain’t the same. Now say goodnight and go to bed.”³⁰⁵ Rose’s ambition for June, the “talented one,” leads to playing favorites. The second example of this “remoteness” can be found in act 1, scene 9, when Rose ignores June’s words entirely: June, seeing perhaps the first authentic opportunity for a successful career, exudes, “Momma, this is my chance to be an actress. Mr. Grantziger can make me a star!”³⁰⁶ Here, Rose just counters: “You are a star! And I made you one!”³⁰⁷ putting a stop to the conversation because Rose is unwilling to consider any career path for her children in which she does not share. Another crucial example of this selective blindness is Rose ignoring Louise’s and Herbie’s excitement about the possibility of getting out of show business after June has left. When Herbie offers to take care of both and Louise pleads, “Oh yes! Momma, say yes!”³⁰⁸ Rose ignores her words completely, instead voicing a short internal monologue: “I’m used to people walking out … I pushed you aside for her. I made everything just for her.”³⁰⁹ Here, Laurents makes Rose’s remoteness explicit with a stage direction: “She is [so] carried away now by her own determination and emotion that she does not see the look that has come over LOUISE’s face.”³¹⁰ While Rose still thinks to do good by apologizing to Louise and giving her the star spot, she nevertheless lives in her obsession and does

³⁰⁵ Laurents, *Gypsy – A Musical Fable*. 1-2-9.

³⁰⁶ Ibid. 1-9-55.

³⁰⁷ Ibid. 1-9-55.

³⁰⁸ Ibid. 1-11-69 up to 1-11-70.

³⁰⁹ Ibid. 1-11-69 up to 1-11-70.

³¹⁰ Ibid. 1-11-70. Original emphasis.

not care about what Herbie and Louise want. They do not even have a chance to tell her their preference, since Rose does not allow any possible objection. Consequently, Daly's interpretation approaches Merman's interpretation, even though Daly sees her being remote from her children and also as "a monster and abrasive."³¹¹ When Lansbury considers the children finally succeeding as "a terrible blow to her [Rose]" (see above), Lansbury's interpretation of the character seems to see Rose as jealous of her children and resentful that they have left her behind and not shared their success with her. Daly's new approach to the portrayal brought Rose back towards Merman's explanation, seeing Rose more like the mother who "wanted everything for her two girls"³¹² – but, unfortunately, they did not want the same things as their mother.

A completely different aspect of Rose's motherhood brought Peters into her "deeply personal"³¹³ interpretation in 2003. She explains, "What's pushing her [Rose] is what she didn't have in life: opportunity. Her mother deserted her – that's a pretty devastating thing. I think that motivates her as well as [the desire] to give her children what she didn't have. 'I'm not going to let them sit away their lives like I did!'"³¹⁴ This aspect of "opportunity" can be regarded in two ways: Initially, when Rose begins to promote her children, vaudeville theatre is at its climax and she has real opportunities to sell the child act. But when the act is "washed up"³¹⁵ and vaudeville is dying, Rose continues to search for opportunities that do not exist anymore to sell the same act, instead of creating something new. Even for Louise's strip number, Rose chooses June's song "Let Me Entertain You" from act 1, scene 1.³¹⁶ Rose cannot change her vision to fit the *changing* opportunities. Another factor to support the interpretation of opportunity as Rose's main motivation is the fact that she has always been solely responsible for her daughters. This allows her to decide what *she* wants for her children – at least until

³¹¹ Tyne Daly cit. in Samelson, "From the Archives: Tyne Daly Took on Rose for the 30th Anniversary of *Gypsy*".

³¹² Ethel Merman cit. in Merman and Eells, *Merman*. 205.

³¹³ Bernadette Peters cit. in Gans, "From the Archives: Bernadette Peters Joined the Sisterhood of Roses With the 2003 *Gypsy* Revival".

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*

³¹⁵ Laurents, *Gypsy – A Musical Fable*. 2-2-18.

³¹⁶ "Rose: Say, you can do June's 'Let me entertain you' number!" See *ibid.* 2-4-36.

they grow up, although as this begins to happen in actuality, she is not able to let go of her control. Furthermore, having been deserted by her own mother, she wants to do better and is utterly determined to give her children the opportunities she did not have – whether her children want it or not.

Thus Peters's argument about opportunity is justifiable. Remembering that Peters's interpretation was considered to show Rose's vulnerability, here might be a reason why her Rose "didn't delight everyone,"³¹⁷ as Robinson states. Jumping on opportunities demands a more aggressive appearance than Peters's "kewpie doll looks and her bubbly personality"³¹⁸ could deliver. While Merman, Lansbury, and Daly portrayed Rose as the one driving the whole situation, Peters intended to play her as being pushed – in other words, more passively. After three different but powerful interpretations of Rose, some critics and a part of the audience perceived Peters's version as too "sweet," or at least too introverted. According to Robinson, for example, she used her looks "to slyly hypnotize the audience into her charms, making them victims of her manipulations as well."³¹⁹ I would argue that this made her portrayal more sympathetic, but not riveting enough for an audience that has been waiting to see how "its" beloved Broadway Belt, Bernadette Peters, would interpret the "monster mother." "We like her [Peters's Rose], and we are reeled in by her,"³²⁰ continues Robinson. Interestingly, this portrayal bears more resemblance to the real Hovick,³²¹ described as likable, "charming and charismatic"³²²; Laurents transformed her into a monster to serve the drama. As Robinson states, Hovick was "less of a battleaxe and more of a petite firecracker."³²³ This image corresponds more to Peters than to the monster Laurents had originally created, the one adhered to more closely by Merman, Lansbury, and Daly. Even

³¹⁷ Robinson, "Ethel and Angela and Patti, Oh My! Who is the Fiercest Rose of All?"

³¹⁸ Ibid.

³¹⁹ Ibid.

³²⁰ Ibid.

³²¹ Just to remember that Mendes had chosen Peters for her resemblance to Hovick, her interpretation is thus in line with that of the director.

³²² Quinn, *Mama Rose's Turn – The True Story of America's Most Notorious Stage Mother*. Pos. 163.

³²³ Robinson, "Ethel and Angela and Patti, Oh My! Who is the Fiercest Rose of All?"

Peters's physicality, as little as the difference may be, corresponded more to Hovick, who is said to have been *petite*³²⁴: Peters is five-and-a-quarter feet tall, while Daly's and Merman's body height is about five-and-a-half feet and Lansbury even measures nearly five-and-three-quarter feet. Hence, in the eyes of many in the audience and some critics, Peters did not fit in the portrayal of the monstrous character; Merman (or Lansbury) may still have been their point of reference. Nevertheless, Peters's interpretation "offer[ed] a very fresh approach to this creature and her machinations,"³²⁵ and will certainly influence future interpretations of that part.

In 2008, LuPone brought her interpretation of Rose, the "stage mother from hell,"³²⁶ back onto the Broadway stage. Even more "petite" than Peters, at five feet and two inches, LuPone is described as "toppling" Merman's Rose,³²⁷ and "lay[ing] to rest the ghost of Merman."³²⁸ Certainly, LuPone is the first actress in a *Gypsy* Broadway revival with a vocal sound comparable to Merman's, leaving aside a discussion about loudness and amplification (although I will discuss vocals in portraying Rose in chapter 4.4). From the first phone call with Laurents, LuPone insisted on not playing Rose "as she has been played in the past."³²⁹ Despite descriptions like Jeff Lunden's "stage mother from hell"³³⁰ or Ben Brantley's "child-flattening maternal steamroller,"³³¹ LuPone sees "vulnerability and humanity."³³² However, she concedes, it is "not that she [Rose] wouldn't turn into a tigress at the drop of a hat."³³³ Astonishingly, despite Peters being criticized for doing so, LuPone uses the term that had been attributed to Peters' interpretation: "vulnerability." In this

³²⁴ Quinn, *Mama Rose's Turn – The True Story of America's Most Notorious Stage Mother*. 45.

³²⁵ Robinson, "Ethel and Angela and Patti, Oh My! Who is the Fiercest Rose of All?"

³²⁶ Jeff Lunden, "Stage Mother From Hell: Needy, Greedy Mama Rose," *National Public Radio*, no. April 13 (2008), <https://www.npr.org/2008/04/13/89512165/stage-mother-from-hell-needy-greedy-mama-rose?t=1579104117697>.

³²⁷ Ivry, "Patti LuPone Tops Ethel Merman's *Gypsy*".

³²⁸ Ibid.

³²⁹ LuPone and Diehl, *Patti LuPone – A Memoir*. 5.

³³⁰ Lunden, "Stage Mother From Hell: Needy, Greedy Mama Rose".

³³¹ Brantley, "What Ever Happened to Momma Rose?".

³³² LuPone and Diehl, *Patti LuPone – A Memoir*. 291.

³³³ Ibid.

respect, LuPone stepped into Peters' footsteps, despite her very different actor's personage. LuPone's *vulnerability* needs also to be understood as strongly connected to the term "humanity," in the sense of *being human*. Without going deeper into the philosophical discourse about what "being human" implies, LuPone probably wants to indicate with this term that Rose is *not* a monster: It is human to commit errors, even as a mother. "It's a mother's lament, and I'm a mother,"³³⁴ LuPone says. "Rose has just been blindsided by June's departure, but she's a survivor,"³³⁵ explains LuPone about the finale of act 1. "She has to survive. She's holding that family together."³³⁶ These words show a crucial difference between LuPone's and earlier interpretations of Rose's character: LuPone interprets Rose more like a woman who tries to be a good mother but fails. She also interprets her as a strong and *independent* woman, completely incompetent as a *wife*, which is what Herbie wants her to be.

There are many layers and possibilities for an interpretation of Rose's motherhood, and every aspect has its reason to be portrayed: On the one hand, Rose is holding the family together through the child act she is creating and directing; on the other, she is the one responsible for the family's disruption. Rose misses the chance to get out of show business by marrying Herbie because this is not her goal. This is also the reason why Laurents did not want Rose to cry at the end of act 1.³³⁷ "That is an admission of defeat. Rose can't do that You've got another act to play, and the character can't go there at that point. They have to keep moving forward,"³³⁸ states LuPone. Certainly, if Rose marries Herbie at the end of act 1, the story would be finished and Herbie, Rose, and Louise could live as a family happily ever after, but that does not happen: Ignoring the defeat of losing June, the younger of her daughters, Rose creates a new act with Louise as the star. The "terrible blow"³³⁹ Lansbury speaks

³³⁴ Patti LuPone cit. in Andrew Gans, "Diva Talk: Rose in Full Bloom – Chatting with 'Gypsy' Star Patti LuPone," *Playbill*, no. March 14 (2008), <http://www.playbill.com/article/diva-talk-rose-in-full-bloom-chatting-with-gypsy-star-patti-lupone-com-148429>.

³³⁵ Ibid.

³³⁶ Ibid.

³³⁷ Ibid.

³³⁸ Ibid.

³³⁹ Peikert, "Angela Lansbury Reflects on Her Performance of 'Rose's Turn' in Gypsy".

of is that, after all her efforts and sacrifices, her children succeed *without her*: June in an act (with Tulsa) in a club in Kansas City and Louise as a stripper. At first, Louise's success is Rose's dream coming true, but it becomes a defeat when Louise *continues* her career as a stripper. In act 2, scene 5, after Rose hangs the cow's head³⁴⁰ upon a spike, Louise orders her maid to take it down. Rose tells her, "You need something to remind you that your goal was to be a great actress, not a cheap stripper."³⁴¹ As if the rejection of the cow's head were not enough, Louise's words³⁴² pushing her mother away drive Rose to shout: "LET ME DO SOMETHING, DAMNIT!"³⁴³ Here, Daly's idea of Rose as remote from her children finds its climax: Rose cannot understand that she has no more influence on her daughter's life until Louise shouts back, "Momma, you have got to let go of me!"³⁴⁴ Only then does Rose begin to understand that she is not a part of Louise's life anymore and, consequently, not a part of show business. Her façade as the strong woman who, while not a star herself, is still the star's *mother*, breaks down and shows what Peters calls her vulnerability: not being needed anymore hurts her deeply. When Rose asks, "What'd I do it for?"³⁴⁵ her daughter responds, "I thought you did it for me, Momma"³⁴⁶ Here, Rose faces her biggest defeat: not achieving *any* recognition, not even as a mother.

When Merman says that Rose "gave up the love of her life for Louise and June,"³⁴⁷ she sees Rose as the mother sacrificing her life for her children. However, Rose did not give up Herbie for her children, but because she was obsessed with show business. Herbie offers her a home and a life without "one single worry the rest of your life"³⁴⁸ at the end of act 1. When Louise bursts out, "Oh, yes! Momma, say yes!"³⁴⁹ it is obvious that there is no reason to continue a life in show business. Still,

³⁴⁰ Louise was wearing this cow's head during the child act when June still was its star.

³⁴¹ Laurents, *Gypsy – A Musical Fable*. 2-5-44. Original emphasis.

³⁴² "Louise: You don't have to. That's what I've got a maid for." Ibid. 2-5-47.

³⁴³ Ibid. Original emphasis.

³⁴⁴ Ibid. 2-5-49. Original emphasis.

³⁴⁵ Ibid. 2-5-50.

³⁴⁶ Ibid. 2-5-51.

³⁴⁷ Ethel Merman cit. in Merman and Eells, *Merman*. 205.

³⁴⁸ Laurents, *Gypsy – A Musical Fable*. 1-11-69.

³⁴⁹ Ibid. 1-11-69.

Rose cannot give in to living a life with Herbie and Louise as “the best damn–family that ever was.”³⁵⁰ She cannot give up her life as a stage mother. Herbie accepts and stays with her and Louise. Although Herbie fell in love with Rose when he saw her looking like “a pioneer woman without a frontier,”³⁵¹ he finally leaves her when she wants to delay their marriage in favor of Louise appearing as a stripper in the star spot of a burlesque theater. When Herbie says, “Oh I still love you – but all the vows from here to doomsday... they couldn’t make you a wife. I want a wife. I’m going to be a man if it kills me,”³⁵² he solidifies Rose’s defeat as a *woman* unable to be a *wife* like Herbie wants her to be. In line with this side of Rose, the next chapter concerns the interpretation of the character as a woman, and her relationship to men, especially Herbie.

4.3.2 Madame Rose – A Woman True to Herself

In *Gypsy*, Rose is called “Madame” respectfully by every man she meets. When Herbie meets Rose, he falls instantly for her charms. Admitting that he had seen her before in an office, looking like “a pioneer woman without a frontier” (as quoted above), he expresses his admiration for this vision of her, a powerful woman. He confirms that by asking directly in his next sentence whether Rose would consider marrying again.³⁵³ From the moment he accepts the role of agent for Louise and June, he submits himself to everything Rose decides, and he is conscious of it. When Rose tells him admiringly, “All this time we’ve been together, and you still stand up for me,”³⁵⁴ he answers, “Instead of standing up to you.”³⁵⁵ Later in this discussion, Herbie reminds Rose that she promised to marry him, and if she doesn’t, “it’ll end with me picking up and walking.”³⁵⁶ Rose takes Herbie’s love for granted and answers, “Only around the block.”³⁵⁷ In the following duet, “You’ll Never

³⁵⁰ Herbie’s words in act 1, scene 11. *Ibid.* 1-11-69.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.* 1-4-18.

³⁵² *Ibid.* 2-4-37.

³⁵³ *Ibid.* 1-4-18.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 1-7-40.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.* Original emphasis.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 1-7-42.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

Get Away from Me," Herbie repeats his warning, singing "I WARN YOU THAT I'M NO BOY SCOUT,"³⁵⁸ but Rose charms him again. Although Herbie admires Rose for the woman she is, he hopes that he can change her into the wife he desires, but eventually realizes this is futile.

However, Rose shows the audience as early as in act 1, scene 2 that she is not a woman like her father or any other man want her to be. She tells her father, "After three husbands, I'm through with marriage. I want to enjoy myself,"³⁵⁹ and continues defiantly, "Anybody that stays home is dead! If I die, it won't be from sittin'! It'll be from fightin' to get up and get out!"³⁶⁰ Meeting Herbie, a former vaudeville agent, she wavers in this resolve. When she repeats her disinterest in marriage to him, it is not irrevocable: "Oh. Well, after three husbands, it takes an awful lot of butter to get you back in the frying pan."³⁶¹ She suggests that Herbie could have a chance if he would be able to offer her enough. Although Rose feels attracted to him, with this statement she means his qualities as an agent for the child act, while Herbie thinks she means a good income and a stable home. Unfortunately, Herbie's vision is more or less exactly what she is fleeing, as the audience knows from two scenes earlier: In "Some People," the first-act-*I-want* song (a conventional song type in Broadway musical theatre), Rose explains in detail her independent feminist attitude when she sings that she will not be "knitting sweaters,"³⁶² "sitting still"³⁶³ or "playing Bingo and paying rent."³⁶⁴ She is excited about getting rid of "all the socials I had to go to, all the lodges I had to play,"³⁶⁵ and even considers people who love this kind of life to be "humdrum people"³⁶⁶ who "can sit and rot."³⁶⁷ Thus her attitude about what life should be for her is clear from the beginning: After (at least) two marriages, each time giving up her dreams and playing the part of

³⁵⁸ Ibid. 1-7-44. Original emphasis.

³⁵⁹ Ibid. 1-2-9.

³⁶⁰ Ibid. 1-2-10.

³⁶¹ Ibid. 1-4-18.

³⁶² Ibid. 1-2-10.

³⁶³ Ibid.

³⁶⁴ Ibid. 1-2-11.

³⁶⁵ Ibid. 1-2-12.

³⁶⁶ Ibid.

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

a socially acceptable wife, the strong, independent woman refuses to try again and instead searches for the possibility of “enjoying herself” in show business. Accepting that it is too late for her,³⁶⁸ she is not willing to give up the dreams she has for her daughters, even though she loves Herbie, as she finally admits in act 2, scene 2, when she says “I love you, you know.”³⁶⁹ When Herbie suggests that Louise and June should be in school,³⁷⁰ she makes clear that she does not want her girls to “be like other girls: cook and clean and sit and die!”³⁷¹ and thus transfers onto her children her resistance to the life of a woman in the usual social order. This understanding of the character corresponds to Lansbury’s interpretation when she states, “Rose is an extraordinary woman, and the thing is she really, really wanted everything for herself. That’s the thing about Rose. She brought her girls up, and they were really fulfilling everything that she would have wanted to do in her life.”³⁷² Such a point of view suggests a portrayal of Rose forcing her children to live the life she wanted for herself. However, during their childhood, the girls live mostly a happy life (as mentioned), until they become teenagers and must pretend to be children to maintain the child act. Seeing Rose and her daughters happy, Herbie accepts this life for the time being and, as he originally came from show business himself, seems not to be so unhappy, either – at least while he can sell the child act to respectable theaters. Nevertheless, he certainly hopes for this life to end,³⁷³ at the latest when the children are grown a bit older, not recognizing Rose’s obsession to succeed.

Does her attitude make her a mean-spirited woman, one who uses Herbie without any remorse? Certainly not since she never makes a secret about who she is. “I think Rose is a truth teller,”³⁷⁴ Daly says. “One

³⁶⁸ Ibid. 1-2-8.

³⁶⁹ Ibid. 2-2-19.

³⁷⁰ Ibid. 1-7-41.

³⁷¹ Ibid.

³⁷² Angela Lansbury cit. in Peikert, “Angela Lansbury Reflects on Her Performance of ‘Rose’s Turn’ in *Gypsy*”.

³⁷³ “Herbie: See, I could be a district manager and we could stay put in one place.” See Laurents, *Gypsy – A Musical Fable*. 1-11-69.

³⁷⁴ Samelson, “From the Archives: Tyne Daly Took on Rose for the 30th Anniversary of *Gypsy*”.

of the things I really like about her—although she's a monster and abrasive—is that she's a flat-out, straight person.”³⁷⁵ Herbie stays with her and the children but, unfortunately, their relationship is based on a big misunderstanding. Although Rose constantly refuses to marry Herbie, even after June, Tulsa, and all the boys have left, he still hopes to marry her and to live a married life, fitting into society outside show business. Rose, for her part, does not doubt that Herbie accepts her and loves her for who she is, since he already has stayed for so long. At last, when she loses every hope for Louise’s career, *she* even asks Herbie to marry her³⁷⁶ – but then kills this happy end the moment she sees a new opportunity for Louise to become a star, “maybe only in burlesque, maybe only in second rate burlesque at that – but let’s walk away a star.”³⁷⁷ In speaking of walking away, of course, she signals still wanting to quit show business and marrying Herbie, resigning herself to the loss of her bigger dreams. She wants to have a last triumph, even though it is through Louise appearing in a strip show – but it is too late: Herbie feels pushed aside one time too many, assumes that Rose is unable to change, and leaves her.³⁷⁸ Herbie falls in love with Rose for who she is – and leaves her for the same reason. Rose is and was always herself, not accepting a woman’s usual role in the social order.

As is the case in many movies of the 1950s,³⁷⁹ Rose is a woman admired for being strong, independent, self-supporting. However, in such movies, as soon as marriage is on the table, the woman needs to accept becoming a *wife*, which implies being a housewife, staying at home, and taking care of her children. The woman gives up her self-determined life in favor of a happy end with a man.³⁸⁰ In *Gypsy*, Rose’s situation is different: She has lived married life repeatedly, and while she has children, she takes care of them on her own. All she needs from

³⁷⁵ Ibid.

³⁷⁶ “Rose: Herbie -- how about marrying me?” See Laurents, *Gypsy – A Musical Fable*. 2-2-19. Original emphasis.

³⁷⁷ Ibid. 2-4-34.

³⁷⁸ Ibid. 2-4-36.

³⁷⁹ As mentioned before, most Doris Day movies and other, comparable film correspond perfectly to the cliché.

³⁸⁰ Usually, the happy end is the movie’s end, and whether she stays happy in her marriage or not remains unsolved.

Herbie is for him to manage her daughter's act – and to be her lover. Finally accepting marriage with him and leaving show business could only appear to be a failure in her eyes – not only professionally, but also as a woman, as she would have to return to life within the social order. When Rose wants to reschedule the marriage, Herbie recognizes that Rose loves being in show business more than she loves him. Although Rose pleads "Don't leave, Herbie ... I need you,"³⁸¹ she cannot repair the damage done; when Herbie asks her in reply, "... What for?"³⁸² Rose gives the wrong answer, saying "A million things."³⁸³ Thus Herbie understands they could never be happy outside of show business. "Just one would be better,"³⁸⁴ he replies before his last goodbye. He is looking for a "real" wife as per married women's social status in the 1920s, the time in which the story plays. In the musical premiering in 1959, the character Rose stays true to herself – as Hovick did in the 1920s. Abbotson sees Hovick as "the clear winner: a strong female character in an era that was fast trying to redefine what it was to be a woman."³⁸⁵ Actually, the social order did not change very much until 1959, the time *Gypsy* premiered, and the musical *Gypsy* could easily have been a failure. As Kellow notes, "The matinees in *Gypsy* were especially tricky, because the mothers in the audience tended to take a dim view of the character of Rose and withhold applause."³⁸⁶ However, as a bad example of a mother, "punished" by her daughters, who push her away, this "monster" turned *Gypsy* into a big success in 1959. In subsequent revivals, at least from 1989 on, the character Rose slowly gained more sympathy as an independent woman and single parent, even though she remained an imperfect mother. "She's invincible," Daly says, according to Judy Samelson, "Absolutely invincible. Whether she's charming people or bullying them or seducing them. When she's doing that, she's on a roll, she's winning. It's *happening*. And then that kid breaks her heart. And it

³⁸¹ Laurents, *Gypsy – A Musical Fable*. 2-4-38.

³⁸² Ibid.

³⁸³ Ibid.

³⁸⁴ Ibid.

³⁸⁵ Abbotson, *Modern American Drama: Playwriting in the 1950s: Voices, Documents, New Interpretations*. 154.

³⁸⁶ Kellow, *Ethel Merman: A Life*. 186.

makes her insane with fury.”³⁸⁷ Rose becomes a victim in her own eyes, feeling hard-done-by. In the end, Rose is not the strong woman she was before; she even turns to her daughter “with an embarrassed smile”³⁸⁸ after “Rose’s Turn,” which is not like her throughout the musical. Neither recognized as a mother nor as a self-sufficient, strong woman, her image is destroyed; the “monster” is broken.

Madame Rose has as many faces as Mama Rose and both have needed constant revision due to women’s significantly changed social status since the beginning of the 20th century, the time when Hovick’s original story occurred. Certainly women’s social status affects the actor’s personage of a Broadway Belt, as a woman of her time and place, and thus the way she brings that personage into her portrayal of Rose. However, until the 2003 revival, the character is primarily an evil stage mother. After the original Broadway production and three revivals before 2008, LuPone might even have reinforced that image in the fourth revival, but her actor’s personage, especially her public outbursts offstage, also shed another light on gender expectations, confirming *Gypsy* as a feminist musical and Rose as a feminist character.

However, interpretations of the character Rose cannot uniquely be displayed through acting differently. Remembering Taylor’s argument that the audience connects to song, dance, and character by experiencing the performer’s actions and feeling the emotions,³⁸⁹ *Gypsy*’s belt songs are crucial for the portrayal of Rose. The songs “Some People,” “Everything’s Coming Up Roses” and “Rose’s Turn” frame Rose’s portrayal. Thus every Broadway Belt needs to belt out these songs while “acting in a frame, performing with traces of self-consciousness,”³⁹⁰ as Hirsch states, in order to give the spectators the chance to connect to the character while still recognizing the Broadway diva they had come for. Robinson verifies how crucial the interpretation of these songs is when he writes, “Ask any actress, dead or alive, who belted out “Some People” in the musical *Gypsy* (Merman, Lansbury, Daly, Peters, and

³⁸⁷ Samelson, “From the Archives: Tyne Daly Took on Rose for the 30th Anniversary of *Gypsy*”.

³⁸⁸ Laurents, *Gypsy – A Musical Fable*. 2-6-54.

³⁸⁹ Taylor and Symonds, *Studying Musical Theatre – Theory and Practice*. 243.

³⁹⁰ Hirsch, *Harold Prince and the American Musical Theater*. 88.

LuPone), they can tell you it afforded them that occasion to elevate their performing skills into the stratosphere.”³⁹¹

Although acting is claimed by many to be the most crucial factor in casting the leading lady of a musical,³⁹² the interpretation of the associated belt songs certainly makes the difference between a good, great, and exceptional portrayal of a Broadway musical diva role, especially Rose in *Gypsy*. The song “Some People” in the second scene of the musical presents Rose as a determined woman and mother ready to do whatever it takes to push her daughters’ career – even by stealing her father’s gold 50-year-employee plaque from the railroad company.³⁹³ The first-act finale, “Everything’s Coming Up Roses,” shows Rose’s unbroken obsession with success – even after the backlash caused by June leaving her. Both songs are highly demanding belt songs, asking for a big voice and strong emotional expression. However, the eleven o’clock number “Rose’s Turn” is considered to be the cherry on the cake for every Broadway Belt: Including parts of Rose’s two major songs of act 1 as well as others, Rose’s emotional breakdown is vocally as demanding as “Some People” and “Everything’s Coming Up Roses.” Following Rose’s monologue in which she realizes that she missed the chance to succeed in show business for herself in favor of her children and that she will not even get any recognition for this sacrifice, this song needs the talent of a true Broadway diva. As I showed, each Broadway Belt puts her actor’s personage into the portrayal of Rose, and here, in “Rose’s Turn,” acting and belting merge together to the point that the audience’s perception of the character Rose merges with the perception of the respective performer, bringing Rose *alive*.

Consequently, the last chapter will concentrate on the song analysis of “Rose’s Turn” as performed by Merman, Lansbury, Daly, Peters, and LuPone, representing the highest achievement of a mature Broadway Belt as a true Broadway diva.

³⁹¹ Robinson, “The 7 Qualities That Define a Broadway Diva”.

³⁹² As it is the case for Sondheim (cit. in 2.4.1.), representative of many others. See Sondheim, “This Interview with Stephen Sondheim Was Conducted by the Library of Congress on February 6, 2017.”

³⁹³ Laurents, *Gypsy – A Musical Fable*. 1-2-12.

4.4 “Rose’s Turn” – The Belter’s Turn

Songs in certain positions in typical Broadway musical theatre have certain functions that writers know, and audiences learn to expect. The eleven o’clock number in a musical, for example, has a long tradition as a song type. “First and foremost, the 11 o’clock number was an invigorating highlight to leave the audience delighted at the end of the show, a memorable melody they could leave the theatre humming, and often something of an up tune to brighten their mood,”³⁹⁴ explains Ben Rimalower in *Playbill*. With the invention of book musicals, this song became more meaningful and challenging and the lead character had to close the story with a “realization or change-of-heart.”³⁹⁵ Typically, the first act’s final song (at least in a two-act show) functions as a cliffhanger – making the audience curious about what will happen in the second act. The song is especially riveting if the lead character has experienced a major reversal or redirection from her original goals during the first act, as Rose has. The leading performer in a standard Broadway musical has already defined these goals in the “I Am/I Want” song early in the show by singing about defining aspects of his or her identity and/or fondest desire.³⁹⁶

In *Gypsy*, the leading lady portraying Rose has exclusively all three of these song types to deliver, the I Am/I Want song, an end-of-act-one cliffhanger, and an eleven-o’clock number. In scene 2, Rose presents in “Some People” who she is and what she wants, being a determined single mother who does not accept a life of mediocrity for herself and absolutely not for her two daughters, a determination reckless enough to pursue her goal by stealing her father’s gold plate (as mentioned in chapter 4.3.2). The first act’s finale is the song “Everything’s Coming Up Roses,” manifesting “female self-assertion,”³⁹⁷ to cite Wolf once again, reinforcing Rose’s dedication to pursue her children’s career: Even though she needs to give up her dreams of June becoming a star

³⁹⁴ Ben Rimalower, “This Time For Me: The Essential 11 O’Clock Numbers,” *Playbill*, no. July 19 (2014), <http://www.playbill.com/article/this-time-for-me-the-essential-11-o'clock-numbers-com-324660>.

³⁹⁵ Ibid.

³⁹⁶ Wolf, *Changed for Good – A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*. 1351.

³⁹⁷ Ibid. Pos. 131.

after June elopes, Rose's fixation turns to Louise, not taking "No" for an answer. Herbie, Louise, and the audience are left in shock that the story cannot finish with a happy ending right now, thus keeping up their hope of a turnaround in the second act. Then, last but not least, in the second act, when it becomes obvious for Rose that she has lost everything – her daughters, Herbie, and the hope of a share of Louise's success – "Rose's Turn" is the eleven o'clock number a Broadway Belt can only dream about. However, in *Gypsy*, this number is not destined to let the audience "leave the theatre humming or brighten their mood," as Rimalower suggests. The structure of this song – including the monologue as a kind of recitative without music – is dramatically challenging and asks not only for a highly emotional interpretation but also rhythmic precision and strong belting abilities, not every voice can achieve.

Even being intrigued to analyze "Some People," "Everything's Coming Up Roses" and "Rose's Turn," I will concentrate in this chapter on the rendition of the latter. This eleven o'clock number stands for everything a Broadway Belt personifies, exposing her actor's personage, her acting talent, and her unconventional belt voice in her unique interpretation in portraying Rose. Rimalower seems to be on to something when he describes this number as "the apex of traditional musical comedy as well as the dawn of darker, contemporary musical theatre."³⁹⁸

"Rose's Turn," a *tour de force* usually referred to as Rose's nervous breakdown, quotes some of the musical's most crucial songs, like "Let Me Entertain You," "Some People," "Mr. Goldstone" and "Everything's Coming up Roses," and rips them completely out of their original contexts. "Let Me Entertain You" originally sounds like a vaudeville song and becomes the children's main vaudeville stage number before the song is resurrected as the stage music for Gypsy Rose Lee's strip number in burlesque. As mentioned in chapter 4.3., this song frames the story. All other songs in the musical are comparable to popular standards of the 1950s – except for "Rose's Turn." Although this song is not the end of the musical,³⁹⁹ it is the show's climax, musicalizing Rose's desperation and obsession by combining small parts of previous songs, leaving it to

³⁹⁸ Rimalower, "This Time For Me: The Essential 11 O'Clock Numbers".

³⁹⁹ The song is part of the last scene, but a dialogue between Rose and Louise follows the song before the curtain falls.

the audience to understand her or condemn her for her actions – or to feel sorry for her. Thus it is the performer’s sole responsibility to guide the audience into the understanding of her interpretation of the character Rose, by belting and acting her heart out, and each Broadway Belt has her own way to do so.

Before analyzing the song’s theatrical and vocal renditions in the original production and its four revivals, I will structure this scene (act 2, scene 6, including a spoken introduction and song⁴⁰⁰) into eight sections. Each section will be analyzed by comparing the five different interpretations of five Broadway belters to each other with the goal to expose at which point each Broadway Belt fulfilled her mission to deliver a unique interpretation. My analysis will be based on audio and video recordings of live performances published on YouTube. Although there are original cast recordings available, I chose to discuss these recorded-live performances as probably the most truthful renditions of this number. I will divide the scene into eight sections. Certainly, my interpretation of the emotions expressed by each performer is open to discussion: First of all, my particular experience as a voice teacher and female singer, with a certain understanding of vocal technique and interpretation, will influence how I hear the songs. Also, some vocal differences might be incidental, “tones of the moment,” rather than intentional shadings showing nuanced emotions. In addition, and maybe more to the point, the experience of a listener to emotional expression is only in part a product of the singer’s intentions; different listeners are likely to experience the same emotions of a performer in different ways. Thus even my most professional response to aspects of the songs will be tinted by my personal impression. Nevertheless, some interpretation is necessary to demonstrate at which points these five interpretations are unique from each other, and to explain how this is significant to my subject as a whole.

⁴⁰⁰ I will leave out the scene’s end when Louise comes back on stage, since applause is usually granted to the performer at the end of the song and the most crucial moment is over. As mentioned before, this was a theatrical concession made after advice from Oscar Hammerstein.

Act 2

Scene 6⁴⁰¹

Backstage after the show

A lone spot picks up ROSE as she moves down front.

SECTION ONE

ROSE

"I thought you did it for me, Momma." "I thought you did it for me, Momma..." I thought you made a no-talent ox into a star because you like doing things the hard way, Momma."

(Louder)

And you haven't any talent! – not what I call talent! Talent of the deaf dumb and blind maybe. Not an ounce of it, Miss Gypsy Rose Lee.

(The lights now begin to come up,
showing the whole stage, bare
except for a rew [sic] stacked flats of
scenery used earlier in the big
production number. ROSE shouts
defiantly:)

I made you! – and you wanna know why? You wanna know what I did it for?!

(Louder)

Because I was born too soon and started too late, that's why!

SECTION TWO

With what I have in me, I could've been better than ANY OF YOU!
What I got in me– what I been [sic] holding down inside of me – –
oh, if I ever let it out, there wouldn't be signs big enough! There
wouldn't be lights bright enough!

⁴⁰¹ Directions, names and spoken and sung lyrics of "Rose's Turn" as printed and emphasized in the manuscript by Felix Bloch Erben Verlag für Bühne, Film und Funk. See Laurents, *Gypsy – A Musical Fable*. 2-6-52 to 2-6-54.

(Shouting right out to everyone now)

HERE SHE IS BOYS!

(Chord)

HERE SHE IS, WORLD!

(Chord)

HERE'S ROSE!!

Rose's Turn – Rose (Orchestra Men)

ROSE

(Sung)

CURTAIN UP!!!

LIGHT THE LIGHTS.

(Spoken)

Play it, boys.

SECTION THREE

(Sung)

YOU EITHER GOT IT,

OR YOU AIN'T --

AND BOYS I GOT IT!

YOU LIKE IT?

ORCHESTRA MEMBER (shout:)

Yeah!

ROSE

WELL, I GOT IT.

SOME PEOPLE GOT IT

AND MAKE IT PAY.

SOME PEOPLE CAN'T EVEN

GIVE IT AWAY.

THIS PEOPLE'S GOT IT

AND THIS PEOPLE'S SPREADING AROUND.

YOU EITHER HAVE IT

OR YOU'VE HAD IT.

(Spoken)

Hello, everybody! My name is Rose. What's yours?
How d' ya like them eggrolls, Mr. Goldstone?

(Sung)

HOLD YOUR HATS

AND HALLELUJAH,
MOMMA'S GONNA SHOW IT TO YA.

SECTION FOUR

(Spoken)

Ready or not, here comes Momma!

(SUNG)

MOMMA'S TALKIN' LOUD,
MOMMA'S DOIN' FINE,
MOMMA'S GETTIN' HOT,
MOMMA'S GOIN' STRONG,
MOMMA'S MOVIN' ON,
MOMMA'S ALL ALONE,
MOMMA DOESN'T CARE,
MOMMA'S LETTIN' LOOSE,
MOMMA'S GOT THE STUFF,
MOMMA'S LETTIN' GO,
MOMMA --
MOMMA'S --
MOMMA'S GOT THE STUFF,
MOMMA'S GOT TO MOVE,
MOMMA'S GOT TO GO,
MOMMA --
MOMMA'S --
MOMMA'S GOTTA LET GO --

SECTION FIVE

ROSE (Cont'd)

WHY DID I DO IT?

WHAT DID IT GET ME?

SCRAP BOOKS FULL OF ME --

IN THE BACKGROUND.

GIVE 'EM LOVE AND WHAT DOES IT GET YOU?

WHAT DOES IT GET YOU?

ONE QUICK LOOK AS EACH OF 'EM LEAVES YOU.

ALL YOUR LIFE AND WHAT DOES IT GET YOU?

THANKS A LOT -- AND OUT WITH THE GARBAGE.

THEY TAKE THE BOWS

AND YOU'RE BATTIN' ZERO.

SECTION SIX

I HAD A DREAM --

I DREAMED IT FOR YOU,

JUNE,

IT WASN'T FOR ME,

HERBIE.

AND IF IT WASN'T FOR ME

THEN WHERE WOULD YOU BE,

MISS GYPSY ROSE LEE!

SECTION SEVEN

WELL, SOMEONE TELL ME

WHEN IS IT MY TURN??

DON'T I GET A DREAM FOR MYSELF?

STARTIN' NOW IT'S GOIN' BE MY TURN!

GANGWAY, WOLRD,

GET OFFA MY RUNWAY!

STARTIN' NOW I BAT A THOUSAND.

THIS TIME, BOYS, I'M TAKIN' THE BOWS

SECTION EIGHT

AND EVERYTHING'S COMING UP ROSE –
EVERYTHING'S COMING UP ROSES –
EVERYTHING'S COMING UP ROSES
THIS TIME FOR ME!
FOR ME –
FOR ME!⁴⁰²

The reason I have chosen to divide the scene into eight sections lies in my interpretation of what Rose, the character, is speaking and singing about. My analysis is based on everything the creatives and the performers have said about the character, as discussed in the chapters above.

In section one, Rose symbolically addresses her words to Louise, who is not physically present, remembering Louise's last words to her before she left Louise's dressing room: "I thought you did it for me, Momma." Reiterating her view that Louise has no talent (as she always did), Rose concludes that she made Louise a star. For the first time, Rose admits why she did not pursue a career for herself, shouting that she was "born too soon and started too late." To be precise, she might be seen to refer here to the lack of show-business possibilities before the rise of vaudeville and to the fact that she became a mother of two at a very young age.

Section two cumulates in Rose's outburst. Claiming that she could have been better than "any of you," she also includes June in her regrets for having sacrificed her life for her children. Even though Rose always considered June to be talented, she assumes that she herself is the most talented in the family and falls into a kind of a daydream which will only end after the song, when Louise re-enters the scene.

⁴⁰² "For me" appears in the manuscript of the play five times, in the original vocal score six times. I refer here to the vocal score, since that is what the performers are singing. See Styne, Laurents, and Sondheim, *Gypsy – Original Vocal Score*. 183.

In section three, Rose explains what makes her special and that she's "got it," before imitating June's stage entrance in the vaudeville child act. With this imitation, she demonstrates that June's talent was limited to what she, Rose, has taught her. She also remembers how she flattered Mr. Goldstone to bring her daughters on the stage of the Orpheum Circuit, ready to do everything she could in favor of her daughters and not of herself.

In section four, Rose sings about maintaining her supposed talent and strength. Since she does not truly believe in herself, she mixes her false self-confidence with the realization that she cannot hold on to her position as a star's mother, either, and she begins to stutter, demonstrating her insecurity. At the end of this section, she painfully confronts her missed career as well as her lost position as a mother able to decide about her children's professional fate, and (remembering Louise's words in the scene before) realizes, almost as if it has burst from her subconscious, that she's "gotta let go" of Louise and her career, just as she could not stop June from running away.

Due to the pain of having lost her children, her mood turns around, revealed by the changing musical atmosphere in section five. Instead of breaking into tears and screaming her lungs out in desperation, however, Rose recapitulates how her daughters have rejected her and begins to grow furious about the injustice that she is a failure, like a baseball player "batting zero."⁴⁰³

Section six begins with the phrase "I had a dream," a short allusion to "Everything's Coming Up Roses" and "Some People" from act 1. Rose tries to convince herself that she was not a stage mother for her own sake, but for her daughters', stating angrily at the end that Louise would not be the star Gypsy Rose Lee if "it wasn't for me."

Section seven is a personal cry for self-motivation to restart all over, this time for herself. When Rose asks the world to "get offa my runway," she hopes, at least for a few seconds, to have the chance to concentrate on her own career from now on, at last. (Having become a mother at a youthful age, she did not want to desert her daughters to try to get her-

⁴⁰³ "batting zero" is a baseball expression, meaning that the batter did not hit the pitcher's throws with the bat, thus, being unsuccessful.

self a career, as her own mother did. That is the reason she felt the need to make her daughters into stars.) Now, rejected by her daughters, she hopes that this time nothing blocks her "runway" to renown. Nevertheless, this can only be an illusion since she admitted at the beginning, in act 1 scene 2, that this chance was already gone when she said, "It's too late for me."⁴⁰⁴ She also repeated this sentiment at the beginning of this scene here in act 2.

This illusion cumulates in section eight, in which she reprises the musically changed title line from "Everything's Coming Up Roses." First with modified lyrics, "Everything's Coming Up Rose," underlining again her hope that everything will be great for *her*, she reprises then the original phrase that Sondheim created twice more. When Rose repeatedly sings the musical line with the song's title, meaning "everything's gonna be great from now on,"⁴⁰⁵ she is trying to convince herself of the certainty of her success. Then, Rose adds at the end, "...this time for me," repeating "for me" five times, by the end nearly screaming in desperation, because she knows – but still can't admit – that this will not happen. Finally, Rose sings a sixth time, "for me," as her grand finale, belting out "me" on the tone B above middle C.⁴⁰⁶ (This tone lies in the *passaggio* of a female voice and is especially difficult to sing as a full belt tone. I will discuss the problem that occurs concerning this ending in the analysis of section eight.) This last phrase is simultaneously Rose's ultimate moment of hallucination of being a star, and her last cry of despair, realizing that she has transferred her dreams onto her children, who finally succeeded – but without her. It is also, on another layer, a musical statement that the Broadway Belt portraying Rose is exactly the talented and recognized diva the character Rose (and perhaps Hovick) always dreamed of being.

Considering the intentions of the creatives and the respective lead-ing ladies, I will now analyze the five first-cast Broadway renditions of Rose's Turn for each section.

⁴⁰⁴ Laurens, *Gypsy – A Musical Fable*. 1-2-8.

⁴⁰⁵ Steyn, *Broadway Babies Say Goodnight – Musicals Then and Now*. 113.

⁴⁰⁶ Only Merman and Peters have sung Rose's Turn in the original key. See Styne, Lau-rents, and Sondheim, *Gypsy – Original Vocal Score*. 172.

4.4.1 Section One – Setting the Primary Tone

Each performer⁴⁰⁷ begins her interpretation with a different expression. Merman⁴⁰⁸ imitates two times Louise's tone of her last sentence before this scene, "I thought you did it for me, Momma" before declaring again (as she always has) that Louise is just a "no-talent ox" (Rose refers here to the fact that Louise performed as the forepart of a cow costume in the child act with her sister, June) and that it was hard work to make her a star since Louise has no talent. Merman emphasizes, "I made you" to make a statement that it was all her (Rose's) accomplishment. Lansbury's⁴⁰⁹ tone suggests sadness and frustration. When she speaks about Louise not having talent, these emotions cumulate in fury on "Not an ounce of it." Her interpretation of "I made you" sounds near to crying, with her voice turning down at the end of the phrase and trembling. Daly⁴¹⁰ begins on a tone indicating anger, even sarcasm, and keeps it until imitating Louise's star posture on "Miss Gypsy Rose Lee." When Daly says, "I made you," she continues the phrase immediately, asking, "and you wanna know why?" She repeats the question quickly and rhetorically, saying it like an introduction to the following affirmation. Peters⁴¹¹ is the only one who gives the first phrase a different tone when she repeats it. Giving the repeated phrase a melody, as Peters does, modifies the expression of that phrase and could be interpreted as irony or imitation. Putting the accent both times on "for me" in the first sentence and its repetition intensifies Rose's following statement that Louise has no talent. When Peters raises her voice on "Gypsy Rose Lee" and even more on "I made you," at first her sound suggest anger,

⁴⁰⁷ To be guided smoothly through this complex analysis, the reader might follow the YouTube links which will start at the precise moment to watch the section as portrayed by each performer.

⁴⁰⁸ Ethel Merman's 'Rose's Turn' Live Broadway Closing 'Gypsy' Sondheim Styne remastered, March 25, 1961, posted by "jonthesYT," September 23, 2010. (YouTube: Google LLC), 4:56, https://youtu.be/lp7S_awm5GU.

⁴⁰⁹ Rose's Turn [Gypsy, 1974] – Angela Lansbury, posted by "C," May 12, 2011. (YouTube: Google LLC), 4:30, <https://youtu.be/x7ZaX3JXDz>.

⁴¹⁰ *Rose's Turn, Gypsy: Tyne Daly Version*, 5:05.

⁴¹¹ Bernadette Peters – 'Rose's Turn' – 2003 Broadway Preview, posted by "DivaBehavior," October 11, 2009. (YouTube: Google LLC), 6:22, <https://youtu.be/EPODJzcMJw>.

but then she gives the following "you wanna know why" and its repetition a tone of resignation and hurt feelings by, instead of asking these questions, stating the facts quietly and sadly looking down. LuPone's⁴¹² tone indicates anger like Daly's, but not sarcasm. LuPone is the only one who lets her anger cumulate without any pause in "I made you," and continues admitting, furiously, "I was born too soon and started too late, that's why." She nearly shouts when she accentuates "I" and "that's why," which reveals Rose's anger having missed her chance. Peters gives accents on "too soon" and "late," lowering her voice on "that's why." Daly gives three statements by pausing a few seconds after "too soon," "too late," and "that's why." Her choice to pause emphasizes Rose's bitterness. Lansbury continues after the question "you wanna know what I did it for?" without pause until after "that's why." Lowering her voice on "that's why" underlines Rose's heartbreak but spluttering the phrase before without pause adds an extra layer of frustration. Merman sets the accent exclusively on "that's why," affirming that Rose made Louise a star for her (Rose's) own sake.

Each interpretation sets the primary tone of this scene in the first minute: Merman's self-consciousness that it was all about her (Rose), Lansbury's anguish with a rising frustration, Daly's anger turning into bitterness, Peters's pain and resignation, and LuPone's more explosive fury. After this confession, each actress needs to find a way to transform the character into Rose, the star, whose hallucination begins at the end of the next section.

4.4.2 Section Two – Getting Into the Spotlight

Merman⁴¹³ strongly accentuates "better than any of you" and gives "Oh, if I ever let it out" a menacing undertone. Then, she shouts the words up to "Here's Rose," affirming Rose's entrance as the star of her imagination. From "Curtain up" on, she performs as "Rose, the star" and remains at the same time Merman, the star portraying a star by confirming

⁴¹² Patti LuPone – 'Rose's Turn' – 2008 Broadway, posted by "DivaBehavior," October 11, 2009. (YouTube: Google LLC), 5:46, <https://youtu.be/N9HLw7m6dCo?t=50>.

⁴¹³ Sect. two of Merman's interpret. starts at 00:45; https://youtu.be/lp7S_awm5GU?t=43.

her own star status with her loud belt voice. From this moment on, she keeps up the vocal sound she was known for. Lansbury⁴¹⁴ changes after “any of you” to a dramatic, Shakespearian-leading-lady tone⁴¹⁵ that finds its peak on “there wouldn’t be lights bright enough.” She sounds like she is giving orders on “Curtain up,” “Light the lights,” and “Play it, boys.” Daly⁴¹⁶ gives this passage a different tone: Rose’s bitterness ended on “that’s why,” and her rising anger now develops into excitement about herself “on stage.” Daly underlines the change into “Rose, the star,” turning her back to the audience on “there wouldn’t be signs big enough,”⁴¹⁷ then, after “lights bright enough,” she makes a significant pause and turns back to the audience, head uplifted. “Here she is, boys” is the moment Rose’s “star number” begins. Daly has clearly accentuated her transformation from Mama Rose into Rose’s hallucination. This includes also “Curtain up” and “Light the lights,” during which she mimics the physical action of raising a curtain and lighting lights as an effect to demonstrate that Rose’s “show” has begun. On the contrary, Peters⁴¹⁸ intensively expresses her pain about being rejected by accentuating every word on “What I been [sic] holding down inside of me.” Rose’s hallucination only begins with “Here she is, boys”; but then, comparable to Merman, Peters portrays Rose, the star, as the Broadway star she is. Her gestures, underlined by holding long notes on “Curtain up” and “Light the lights,” are performed for the real audience, even though the character Rose is hallucinating. Meanwhile, LuPone⁴¹⁹ remains much longer a furious Rose. LuPone pauses significantly after

414 Sect. two of Lansbury’s interpret. starts at 00:37; <https://youtu.be/x7ZaX3JXDzs?t=37>.

415 In other words, she uses a form of vocal expression that would also fit the character of Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* or another dramatic Shakespearian character role: She ends the phrase by raising the pitch of her voice slightly on “me,” speaking the next phrase as if slowly “rolling down” on the original pitch. This typical theatrical expression is taught in acting classes and is often used to interpret roles in such classics.

416 Sect. two of Daly’s interpret. starts at 00:40; https://youtu.be/EFqDuY5_fxw?t=40.

417 Although Robbins’ choreography is still contractually untouchable and each belter probably moved principally the same way, I can compare gestures and movements only of Daly, Peters, and LuPone, For Merman’s and Lansbury’s renditions of Rose, only audio files are available. (I asked customer service of NYPL and received the answer that Merman’s performance never was videotaped, and Lansbury’s is not accessible outside the Library of Performing Arts.)

418 Sect. two of Peters’s interpret. starts at 00:57; <https://youtu.be/EPODJzcmJw?t=57>.

419 Sect. two of LuPone’s interpret. starts at 1:25; <https://youtu.be/N9HLw7m6dCo?t=85>.

"that's why" and restarts on an angry tone, building it up until "Here's Rose." At this point, a crucial difference in LuPone's interpretation from Daly's and Peters's is visible in LuPone's face: She looks up into the audience with an expression in her eyes as if she is on the edge of madness on "Curtain up" and "Light the lights," before beginning Rose's imaginary show-act with "Play it, boys." Looking in the direction of the orchestra and the audience in the first row, LuPone starts her show as if it were a club act for a smaller audience. From this point, LuPone builds up her performance of Rose's madness systematically.

This section of the song is crucial for the development of what is to come: Merman and Peters have indicated they are giving a "performance" from "Curtain up," while Lansbury has stayed in the character. In Lansbury's interpretation, there is no "Rose is turning mad" at this point; she continues to portray Rose. Daly and LuPone, meanwhile, emphasized on her transformation into "Rose, the star" that no one in the audience can miss. Only Lansbury interprets the character here (as the character actress she is): Rose begins to perform, not Lansbury, whereas the other four belters begin to perform *as themselves* while portraying Rose. They "play" the change into a hallucinating Rose almost too obviously, as the analyses of the following sections will confirm.

In the next phase of Rose's nervous breakdown, all the performers will need their Rose to explain why she is so special.

4.4.3 Section Three – What Makes Rose Special

As early as on the first cue of the orchestra after "Here she is, boys," the music becomes a significant factor in the interpretation of "Rose's Turn." From now on, every decision to pause, to slow down, or to accelerate must happen inside the musical frame of the song's composition. Thus differences between the performances are more sensitive. The first major difference in the *musical* interpretation becomes obvious on the first long-held tone at the end of "spreading around." Merman begins "Rose's Turn" in the original key (also eternalized in the vocal score), Ab major.⁴²⁰ As opposed to the three other leads in *Gypsy*'s Broadway

⁴²⁰ Styne, Laurens, and Sondheim, *Gypsy – Original Vocal Score*. 172.

revivals, only Peters also begins the song in the original key. LuPone's version is a semitone lower, Daly's two semitones and Lansbury's even three semitones, transposed to F major. While this is an absolutely legitimate way to make the song a better fit for the respective performer's voice, it has nevertheless crucial consequences for the interpretation of this first musical segment.

Since Merman⁴²¹ sings without amplification, she needs to sing the lowest tones as loud as possible to be heard, using a *shouting technique*⁴²² when she sings below middle C. From "some people got it" on, she can return to her preferred vocal range and deploy her full belt voice. Lansbury⁴²³ shouts, mostly in a very raspy voice, up until the same passage and does not always follow exactly the melodic line as written in the vocal score. Her choice of a significantly lower key, corresponding to her trained speaking voice as an actress, supports her expression of the character's frustration. By dropping the key, she can avoid register changes that a trained singer generally could handle better. However, she obviously needs a lot of energy to produce the tones, sounding predominantly pushed out under pressure, since Lansbury's voice has to reach the stage microphones. In contrast, Daly,⁴²⁴ singing a semitone higher than Lansbury, clearly feels comfortable in this key: She sounds quite relaxed singing the same phrase in a slower tempo, which is certainly on account of a body mike that amplifies her voice. Nevertheless, a relaxed sound corresponds more to a country-music singer than to a Broadway Belt, which turns Daly's singing in this section more into entertainment than the portrayal of a character. Peters⁴²⁵ sings, from the beginning of this section, the original notes as written in the score (as mentioned), but at a significantly slower tempo than her predecessors.

So does LuPone,⁴²⁶ who also uses her musicality and vocal skills to improve the vocal line. Only a semitone lower than the original key, her

421 Sect. three of Merman's interpret. starts at 1:23; https://youtu.be/lp7S_awm5GU?t=83.

422 Shouting technique in singing means using mostly the sound of the chest voice but still producing resonance and overtones, contrary to the speaking voice.

423 Sect. three of Lansbury's interpret. starts at 1:14; <https://youtu.be/x7ZaX3jXDzs?t=74>.

424 Sect. three of Daly's interpret. starts at 1:22; https://youtu.be/EFqDuY5_fxw?t=82.

425 Sect. three of Peter's interpret. starts at 1:43; <https://youtu.be/EEP0DJzCMJw?t=103>.

426 Sect. three of LuPone's interpret. starts at 1:58; <https://youtu.be/N9HLw7m6dCo?t=118>.

vocal range nearly corresponds to Merman's and Peters's. While Peters belts out as much as possible throughout the melodic lines, LuPone "plays" with the tones, not hesitating to sing piano on "got it and make it pay," as she would in a club act. She consciously takes advantage of the body making in favor of a more lascivious interpretation, flirting with the audience as Rose, even though "LuPone," the performer, shines through when she looks directly and provocatively into the *real* audience in front of the stage (something Rose cannot do, since she is in a hallucination). Merman, Lansbury, Daly, and Peters interpret the end of this section quite similarly, portraying Rose giving a performance by addressing the audience with "Hello everybody! My name is Rose." In contrast, LuPone imitates June's child voice since this phrase is originally June's entry on stage in the sisters' vaudeville act in which she starred. LuPone also uses the same gestures as June did, proving again that it was she, Rose, that instructed the girls in all aspects of their performance. While LuPone accentuates her breasts with a gesture, still using a tone imitating June's child voice on "How d'ya like them eggrolls, Mr. Goldstone," Peters touches her breasts and Daly shakes hers. After this phrase, LuPone's interpretation seems more being her performance, not Rose's, when she flirts with the audience on "Momma's gonna show it to ya," and just articulates "show it to ya" without vocal sound as if it would be something dirty to say. Then, LuPone becomes Rose again, staring with big eyes into the audience, looking mad, spinning around, and laughing like a child in the following instrumental phrase. Contrary to Daly, and shifting from her own interpretation at the beginning of this section, LuPone does not flirt anymore with the audience and her movements are no longer sexy, but more *childish*, which adds credibility to the idea of Rose becoming temporarily lost in her own memories, possibly recalling her own dreams and fears as a child. The audio recording of Merman's rendition makes it impossible to assess this section up to "what's yours." After this phrase, the audience laughs and applauds during the following instrumental break. This suggests that Merman's scenic interpretation of the end of this section has a comic effect on the audience as opposed to being sexy or lascivious. In contrast, Lansbury's version on the audio recording corresponds to her portrayal of Rose up to this point. She gets a little laugh from the audi-

ence after “what’s your” and the orchestral hit on the bass drum – and what is happening after that on stage cannot be discerned. However, she (and Merman) probably use some hip movements like Daly, Peters, and LuPone do, as choreographed by Jerome Robbins.

This section sets the tone each Broadway Belt intends to give her interpretation of the section that follows: performing as a Broadway diva portraying Rose, performing as Rose, or portraying Rose to music.

4.4.4 Section Four: Future Possibilities and Desperation

The next section begins with “Ready or not, here comes Momma”; the audience knows that what is coming now will be all about Rose, the star. Although “talking loud” is a quality that was often negatively imputed to her, the following lyrics are on a self-confident and optimistic tone, at least through “all alone.” At this point, Rose recognizes that everybody has left her. She first tries to ignore it (“doesn’t care”) and she claims she is “lettin loose” but the feeling of loneliness grows systematically stronger as she is “lettin’ go,” and “got to go,” and reaches its peak at “gotta let go.” The lyric reveals an inner struggle in Rose. Merman⁴²⁷ gives no particular vocal expression to this passage and sounds at first like she is reading a grocery list, up to the first stammering “Momma, Momma’s.” This is not to say that she is not acting; Merman might use this expression of indifference to demonstrate Rose’s strong will to protect herself from this painful abandonment by her daughters. She continues in the same tone, getting just a bit louder up to the next stammering, before singing “Momma’s gotta let go” in a commanding tone – like Louise when she said, “Momma, you have got to let go of me!”⁴²⁸ While Lansbury⁴²⁹ first continues with a raspy voice and sounds like she is angry about a bucket list she has to accomplish, her stammering and her last phrase, more screamed than sung, announce that Rose is having a nervous breakdown. Daly⁴³⁰ sells this part less vocally, instead creating

⁴²⁷ Sect. four of Merman’s interpret. starts at 2:23; https://youtu.be/lp7S_awm5GU?t=143.

⁴²⁸ Laurens, *Gypsy – A Musical Fable*. 2-5-49.

⁴²⁹ Sect. four of Lansbury’s interpret. starts at 2:09; <https://youtu.be/x7zaX3JXDzs?t=129>.

⁴³⁰ Sect. four of Daly’s interpret. starts at 2:26; https://youtu.be/EFqDuY5_fxw?t=146.

more of a show act as she touches her body and plays sensuality. Daly's Rose seems to have a short realization of her situation at the first stammering, then tries to pick up her strength until the second stammering and her last phrase. Here, after a significant pause, Daly's vocal expression is comparable to Merman's.

Peters⁴³¹ delivers a quite different interpretation from these. If, up to this moment, her pain was not yet visible for everybody in the audience, Peters's Rose now leaves no doubt that she is heartbroken: She walks forward to the front of the stage, delivering the lyrics in an – apparently – self-confident tone, up to the first stammering. Then, she stops walking and her facial expression shows pain and desperation – no anger, no frustration. After a significant pause, she continues walking forward like she would take back her strength, but her face shows loss and hopelessness as if she might start to cry any second. On her second stammering (she stutters three times instead of two), she pronounces the second "Momma" like this part of her existence, being a mother, is dying. Knowing that Rose was deserted or pushed away by her own mother, then by June, followed by Herbie and now, Louise, this supplementary third "Momma" underlines her loneliness and despair. When she begins her last phrase, she makes a short pause after "Momma's" before saying "gotta let go." Staring into space, Peters holds this expression that shows Rose's pain during the following four bars of instrumental music.

LuPone⁴³² begins by turning her back to the audience on "ready or not." She uses a kind of sing-song on the word "not," like a creepy tone of madness that might bring to mind the atmosphere of a horror scene like in Stephen King's *Pet Sematary*. Exploding on "Momma" at the end of this first phrase, she then continues singing loudly up to "lettin' go," only interrupting this expression on "Momma's all alone," for which she displays a pitiful expression, but immediately takes her loud tone back and turns leftwards on "Momma doesn't care," in the direction Louise's dressing room is supposed to be, as if Rose would say this phrase to her daughter. On her first stammering, she turns around like an aban-

⁴³¹ Sect. four of Peters's interpret. starts at 2:52; <https://youtu.be/EEPODJzcMJw?t=172>.

⁴³² Section four of LuPone's interpretation starts at 3:08. See <https://youtu.be/N9HLw7m6dCo?t=188>.

doned child, looking around with wide-opened eyes as if she were lost or turning mad, searching for her own mother. LuPone returns to her loud vocal expression up to the second stammering. Her body language and head movements suggest that Rose is losing her inner strength, but she ends by singing loudly on “Momma’s gotta let go.” Contrary to all other performers, LuPone holds the note on “go” significantly longer, moving the frequency up and down which sounds slightly like the desperate yawping of an abandoned dog – evoking the feeling that Rose feels being abandoned by every significant person in her life.

All belters give full voice on these phrases and express Rose’s emotions even if not singing loudly in the moments of stammering. Thus they only rely on microphones (except for Merman) to the extent the devices reveal their expression and do not put less energy into their singing. This supports the idea that amplification improves belting in favor of interpretation but cannot replace a strong belt voice when it comes to parts that are emotionally and psychologically very demanding.

The next section emphasizes the difference between being a singer or an actress in interpreting this song.

4.4.5 Section Five – What Did Rose Get?

While this section begins with the words, “Why did I do it?” the question Rose asks Louise at the end of scene 5, this part tells us *what Rose gained* for being a stage mother, or, in other words, the treatment that Rose feels she has received: being thrown “out with the garbage” and “battin’ zero.” For the next twenty-eight bars, good musical timing is crucial. After a tempo and key change, the orchestra starts with a two-bar musical motif, repeated sixteen times (up to the next section, the sixth which begins with “I had a dream”). Rhythmical irregularities give here an accelerating effect without a tempo change, which is a typical finesse of composing technique to intensify a dramatic effect.

The vocal phrases have only a range of a fifth from G below middle C to D above middle C.⁴³³ Thus the musical tones are placed in the range

⁴³³ These are the notes in the original key. To remember, only Merman and Peters are singing in the original key. Styne, Laurens, and Sondheim, *Gypsy – Original Vocal Score*.

of a female *speaking* voice. Nevertheless, Merman⁴³⁴ and Peters⁴³⁵ sing through the section in the original key, LuPone⁴³⁶ mostly sings, only changing to speaking for dramatic reasons, especially on "each of 'em leaves you" and "you're batting zero." Lansbury⁴³⁷ sings this passage, too, but does not the key change as written in the score, beginning her phrase on the note F instead of D above middle C, in the range of her lower-middle singing voice. Singing this phrase in the original key would demand that Lansbury sings through the *passaggio* between chest voice register and middle register.⁴³⁸ This would make it more difficult for her to keep the same sound over this phrase's range of a fifth. In contrast, Daly⁴³⁹ speaks this part completely. She runs on stage from left to right and back, shouting out her frustration and anger.

While this section is more about what all the effort and pain gained her, the next section is supposed to answer the question of *why* she did what she did. Rose defends her cause again, reestablishing one last time that June and Louise would not be on stage without her vision, dedication, and decision-making.

4.4.6 Section Six – Rose's Dream

This section begins with the words, "I had a dream," the same words and melody Rose had used in act 1 scene 2 in the middle of the song "Some People" and again at the beginning of "Everything's Coming up Roses."⁴⁴⁰ The use of this phrase not only announces that the story's circle is closing and the show will soon come to an end but also signifies the death of Rose's dream. When she reassures in song that she did not have this dream for herself but for others, it is worth remembering that Rose said from the beginning it would be too late to launch a career on her own. Consequently, Rose is not wrong when she says at the end of

⁴³⁴ Sect. five of Merman's interpret. starts at 3:00; https://youtu.be/lp7S_awm5GU?t=180.

⁴³⁵ Sect. five of Peters's interpret. starts at 3:45; <https://youtu.be/EEPODJzcmJw?t=225>.

⁴³⁶ Sect. five of LuPone's interpret. starts at 3:57; <https://youtu.be/N9HLw7m6dCo?t=237>.

⁴³⁷ Sect. five of Lansbury's interpret. starts at 2:51; <https://youtu.be/x7Zax3JXDzs?t=171>.

⁴³⁸ For information on *passaggio* problems, see chapter 2.2.4.

⁴³⁹ Sect. five of Daly's interpret. starts at 3:12; https://youtu.be/EFqDuY5_fxw?t=192.

⁴⁴⁰ Laurens, *Gypsy – A Musical Fable*. 1-2-11 and 1-11-70.

this section, that “Miss Gypsy Rose Lee” would not exist without her: Louise learned exclusively from Rose how to move on a stage and “sell” a number. Even Louise’s celebrated strip posture is something Rose has taught her.

Merman⁴⁴¹ concentrates on singing these tones with the necessary projection. She builds up a crescendo to the end, musically irreproachable and, regarding vocal technique, the best way to express the escalation of feelings like anger and rage to the next level. Lansbury puts more anger into her phrasing, from “And if it wasn’t for me,” to counterbalance limitations in the resonance and vocal power of her singing voice. She sings the vowels wider and more open, so that “wasn’t” sounds like “was-and” (here, she even puts the vowel sound of “a” between “was” and “n’t” to make the second tone on the word sounding bigger), and “so where” sounds like “so wair,” accentuating these vowel sounds intensively. This is necessary to intensify her vocal line because, from “I had a dream” on, she returns in the lower register of her speaking voice. Remembering from chapter 2.2.2 that a speaking voice can only barely be perceived over an orchestra, Lansbury needs to compensate by pushing her voice close to screaming (so that her voice can reach the stage microphones) to be heard over the orchestra that is playing a crescendo, reaching a loud orchestral peak on “Lee.” Merman sings the last tone on the note A above middle C, in the best part of the vocal range of her low-belter voice. For brilliance in the singing voice, it is necessary for every low-belter to mix more head voice into the vocal sound on notes around A above middle C, since every female voice has a natural *passaggio* between A above middle C and the high C (as mentioned). Where exactly, between A and B-flat, B-flat to B, or B to C, depends on the person’s natural timbre. The singer Merman obviously knows how to do the mix. Singing the last word on G above middle C, the actress Lansbury⁴⁴² moves on safe terrain, avoiding a *passaggio* problem; nevertheless, her voice sounds less strong than Merman’s, since she does not seem to use her resonating cavities – which Merman uses inten-

⁴⁴¹ Section six of Merman’s interpretation starts at 3:33. See https://youtu.be/lp7S_awm5GU?t=213.

⁴⁴² Sect. six of Lansbury’s interpret. starts at 3:19; <https://youtu.be/x7ZaX3JXDzs?t=199>.

sively. That is to once again work from the premise that amplification cannot change the substance of a voice to make it sound bigger but helps a voice to be heard and allows the performer to move freely on stage (see chapter 2.3.5).

In 1989, as mentioned, the technical invention of body microphones allows Daly⁴⁴³ to be heard throughout the audience when she sings laterally to an imaginary Herbie, and even backward to an imaginary Louise. She only turns back to the audience on "Miss Gypsy Rose Lee," imitating the stripper posture of Louise. She does not need to push or force the last tone and sings it with the natural volume of her voice, focusing on brilliance and pitch. Bernadette Peters⁴⁴⁴ has the clearest vocal sound of all first-cast Broadway Roses, thus, for her, focusing the tone and singing with brilliance comes more naturally than for voices with a darker timbre. In the beginning, she concentrates on giving energy primarily to the most crucial words in her phrases, like "dream" and "wasn't." This gives her room to express her pain on "I dreamed it for you, June" in a voice choked with tears. From "And if it wasn't for me" on, she gives the whole phrase a laser-like intensity, due to the natural brilliance in her belt voice. LuPone⁴⁴⁵ – usually considered more a singer than an actress – has a similar focus in her voice, but a darker timbre. While she shows Rose's anger on "I dreamed it for you, June," she also suggests on "It wasn't for me, Herbie" that Rose is hurt as a woman who was, once again, deserted by a man. When LuPone sings the whole last part addressed towards one side (like Daly) to an imaginary Louise in anger, she sings all tones with the same loudness. Although LuPone actually *sings* these tones, the constant volume, over six bars long, gives the audience the impression that Rose is screaming her lungs out in anger and a loss of emotional control.

By the end of this section, all belters have made the point that Rose has sacrificed herself without any recognition. In a certain way, Robbins's original idea of a nightmare ballet, in this case made of images of

⁴⁴³ Sect. six of Daly's interpret. starts at 3:39; https://youtu.be/EFqDuY5_fxw?t=219.

⁴⁴⁴ Sect. six of Peters's interpret. starts at 4:18; <https://youtu.be/EEPODJzcMJw?t=258>.

⁴⁴⁵ Sect. six of LuPone's interpret. starts at 4:29; <https://youtu.be/N9HLw7m6dCo?t=269>.

Rose's past,⁴⁴⁶ might be brought to mind: Rose addresses her defense to an imaginary June and Herbie, and then Louise. I would argue that one implication of the "presence" here of the most important persons in Rose's life confirms that the portrayal of Rose also depends on the characters around her: Although she was a stage mother pushing her daughters into careers of her choosing, nobody ever stopped her and now everyone reproaches her on *how* she did it. If her children were, instead, grateful, the audience's perception of the character Rose would not be as a monster, but an angel. However, since everyone has left her, Rose has to be the guilty party – and she is condemned to relive the same nightmare of desertion that she experienced as a child.

If it is in anger, frustration, bitterness, deep emotional pain, or rage turning into madness, this is now the departure point for the next section, when Rose tries to recover from her loneliness by searching for a new start, when she asks "someone" about "a dream for myself." Singing to the music from the middle section of "Some People," she tries to motivate herself, as if Mr. Orpheum's words in her dream she cited to her father in that song in act 1, scene 2⁴⁴⁷ had motivated her to build the child act.⁴⁴⁸ Only now, she is on her own.

4.4.7 Section Seven – When is it Rose's Turn?

Rose's question, "Don't I get a dream for myself?" puts the main question of this passage, "When is it my turn?" into perspective: On the one hand, Rose wants to make it in show business, as her hallucination of being a star demonstrates; on the other, until now, just *being* in show business and dreaming about success was enough for her because she never really thought she was good enough. Saying that she was "born too soon and started too late" feels now to be just an excuse for never really trying: When, after "Rose's Turn," Louise enters the scene

⁴⁴⁶ Deborah Jowitt, *Robbins – His Life, His Theater, His Dance* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004). 324.

⁴⁴⁷ "Rose: And he was saying to me, 'Rose! Get yourself some new orchestrations ... and in jig time you'll be being booked in the big time!' See Laurens, *Gypsy – A Musical Fable*. 1-2-11.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid. 1-2-11.

and says to Rose, "You really would have been something, Mother,"⁴⁴⁹ Rose counters by asking, "Think so?"⁴⁵⁰ as if searching for confirmation. Louise seems to understand her insecurity and, looking for a reason for Rose's lack of success that is not critical of Rose, offers, "If you had someone to push you like I had..."⁴⁵¹ However, Rose knows that this excuse does not justify her destiny: According to Laurents's stage direction, she shakes her head when she continues, "If I could've been, I would've been"⁴⁵² – thus, at last, admitting to herself that she did not have the courage to pursue a career (and even that she might not have been good enough): Since June had talent, Rose built the child act to compensate for her own lack of self-estimation and to live the nomadic life of the show-business gypsy she always wanted to live – without the risk of failure for herself. When she pushes Louise to do the strip by saying, "We can't quit because we're a flop,"⁴⁵³ "I always promised my daughter we'd be a star,"⁴⁵⁴ and "...let's walk away a star"⁴⁵⁵ in scene four of act two, she includes herself in the calculation through use of the first-person plural, portraying Louise's success to be her success, too. Rose still struggles to hang on to what is left of her dreams. But now, deserted by everyone, she must learn that she has been kicked out of the game and that she will not have a piece of Louise's stardom.

Thus, approaching now (in section seven) the end of "Rose's Turn," she needs to salvage the rest of her self-esteem to believe in herself, even if Rose is only alone on this stage and in her struggle, facing the audience of a hallucinatory performance in front of *Gypsy*'s real audience, ironically one Rose always dreamed to have.

Since the vocally and emotionally "big" finale of this song follows this section, Merman⁴⁵⁶ projects the words intensively with her belt voice to the audience to prepare them for the more intense segment to come. Consequently, she does not have as much room left to express

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid. 2-6-54.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid. 2-6-55.

⁴⁵² Ibid.

⁴⁵³ Ibid. 2-4-34.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁶ Sect. seven of Merman's interpret. starts at 3:57; https://youtu.be/lp7S_awm5GU?t=237.

Rose's anger other than belting out loudly. Lansbury⁴⁵⁷ certainly felt the same need to project the words of section seven⁴⁵⁸ into the stage microphones to be understood throughout the theater, since she shouts – nearly screams – the phrases without changing her expression. Her voice sounds pushed to the maximum loudness she can produce on these notes, raspy but not resonating. While Peters⁴⁵⁹ sings these phrases loudly, without pressure, she accentuates the orchestra's cue five times at the beginning of each phrase, not only vocally, but also physically, with flexed arms and clenched fists. This can be perceived as if she is returning to her childhood and demanding something she is not allowed to have, such as traveling with her mother. This acting corresponds to Peters's actor's personage and her "dollish" image, specifically seen in her interpretation of a more vulnerable, even childish Rose who, then, raises her arms as if crying for help. LuPone⁴⁶⁰ powers through the whole phrase significantly faster than all the other leading ladies, building up to her interpretation of Rose's fury in the last section. Only Daly⁴⁶¹ interprets this passage differently: She faces the audience as if asking everyone directly, "When is it my turn?" and "Don't I get a dream for myself?" hoping (as Rose) to get an answer. Then, she underlines Rose's declaration that "startin' now it's gonna be my turn" with a determined gesture⁴⁶² of not taking "No" for an answer. After the following "Gangway, world,"⁴⁶³ Daly falls completely out of the melody and tempo and fearlessly looks at the audience, commanding, "Get offa my runway."⁴⁶⁴ Here, Rose's bitterness has shortly turned into self-confi-

⁴⁵⁷ Sect. seven of Lansbury's interpret. starts at 3:40; <https://youtu.be/x7ZaX3JXDzs?t=220>.

⁴⁵⁸ "Well, someone tell me, when is it my turn? Don't I get a dream for myself? Startin' now it's goin' be my turn! Gangway, world, get offa my runway! Startin' now I bat thousand! This time, boys, I'm taking the bows." See Laurents, *Gypsy – A Musical Fable*. 2-6-54.

⁴⁵⁹ Sect. seven of Peters's interpret. starts at 4:42; <https://youtu.be/EEPODJzcmJw?t=282>.

⁴⁶⁰ Sect. seven of LuPone's interpret. starts at 4:53; <https://youtu.be/N9HLw7m6dCo?t=293>.

⁴⁶¹ Sect. seven of Daly's interpret. starts at 4:00; https://youtu.be/EFqDuY5_fwx?t=240.

⁴⁶² She crosses her arms slightly in front of her and then rapidly throws them to the side as if rejecting anyone else sharing her stage.

⁴⁶³ "Gangway, world!" is an expression that means giving the order, "everyone clear the walkway!"

⁴⁶⁴ To compare with another spoken variation of this phrase, Liza Minnelli presents this variation of "get offa my runway" more fiercely in a concert on December 31st, 1981, eight years before Daly's Rose. See Liza Minnelli – Rose's Turn 1981, posted by "lizafano1," October 22, 2006. (YouTube: Google LLC), 4:31, https://youtu.be/w9_8Av7OCVw.

dence, which Daly solidifies by bowing to the audience when she sings, "This time, boys, I'm taking the bows."

Every Broadway Belt has built her interpretation to culminate in the finale. The last section will show how each leading lady fulfills her goal to interpret Rose, with her main talent and her actor's personage, in her own, personal way.

4.4.8 Section Eight – This Time for ... the Audience

This final section is composed of three repeats of "Everything's Coming up Rose(s),"⁴⁶⁵ followed by one of "This time for me!" and six of "For me!"⁴⁶⁶ For this segment, Merman⁴⁶⁷ slows down, as written in the score, and picks up the faster tempo again when the orchestra accelerates after "This time for me."⁴⁶⁸ Her vocal expression is that of Merman, the star singer, portraying Rose, the star (of her hallucination) – a diva portraying a diva without compromise, with the loud, strong, resonating voice for which she is known. She belts out her last tone powerfully, a B above middle C which is, in terms of vocal technique, one of the worst notes to sing for a female performer with a full low-belt voice, since it is (as mentioned) generally in the *passaggio* between the female middle register and the female head voice. However, this is not the case for Merman, producing always on this note one of her loudest belt tones. She holds the tone over nearly two bars, confirming once again her status as *the* Broadway Belt on this closing night of *Gypsy*'s original production on March 25, 1961. On the contrary, Lansbury⁴⁶⁹ accelerates the tempo and rushes through the first three phrases, including "This time for me," and shouts – nearly screams – the following four repetitions of "For me!" She underlines her portrayal with a raspy voice, interpreting Rose as angry, frustrated, and furiously desperate. She only *sings* the last "For me," giving the note A above middle C a solid belt sound, but without

⁴⁶⁵ The first time, it is "Rose"; the second and third time, "Roses," as written in the manuscript. See Laurens, *Gypsy – A Musical Fable*. 2-6-54.

⁴⁶⁶ Styne, Laurens, and Sondheim, *Gypsy – Original Vocal Score*. 183.

⁴⁶⁷ Sect. eight of Merman's interpret. starts at 4:13; https://youtu.be/lp7S_awm5GU?t=253.

⁴⁶⁸ Styne, Laurens, and Sondheim, *Gypsy – Original Vocal Score*.

⁴⁶⁹ Sect. eight of Lansbury's interpret. starts at 3:56; <https://youtu.be/x7ZaX3JXDzs?t=236>.

the brilliance and resonating quality Merman produced two semitones higher.⁴⁷⁰ Nevertheless, Lansbury fulfills what the audience is waiting for from *her*, the character actress: She puts her actor's personage in the background in favor of the portrayal, interpreting the character Rose and not giving a daydreamed performance of "Rose, the star," nor a performance of "Lansbury, the star." She portrays the character Rose until the last "For me." Only, with the last "For me," she makes a concession, confirming how crucial it is to be able to *sing* in a Broadway musical, even for a character actress. On this last note, she does what an elite Broadway Belt has to do: She belts it out.

Daly, in contrast, continues to play Rose's daydream. After bowing in the direction of the audience at the end of section seven, Daly⁴⁷¹ looks up like she is reading her name on the last row of the second floor in the theater. In the same moment, the name "Rose" appears over her head, composed of light bulbs like an illuminated Broadway show advertisement. Daly portrays Rose, the star of her own daydream, by moving her hips and shaking her shoulders like in a show act, up to "This time for me." Then Daly turns her interpretation back to the character Rose realizing her situation: On the following five shouted repeats of "For me," Daly hits herself two times on the abdomen and grasps three times with both hands in the air, again portraying the bitter and desperate character of Rose. Then she crouches down, to get up again immediately in order to belt out her last "For me!" on a solid B-flat above middle C. She rises slowly, controlled in her body movements, as it is necessary to control the vocal support of the diaphragm to keep the quality of the belt tone. She lifts her arms in the fifth position of a ballerina (in contrast to the celebrated "Evita" arm position LuPone had used for Eva Perón eleven years earlier), but without the tension in her arms a ballerina would have, also in order to control her belt tone, centering her strength on voice support. Thus, on this last tone, Daly is primarily a professional actress controlling the quality of her singing, and she does not stay completely in the character Rose. Her facial and body expression when she bows during the applause following the song is a ques-

⁴⁷⁰ Lansbury ends on the tone A since she does not follow the original key changes.

⁴⁷¹ Sect. eight of Daly's interpret. starts at 4:17; https://youtu.be/EFqDuY5_fxw?t=257.

tion of perception, whether the viewer sees her as Daly or as inhabiting a still-daydreaming Rose.

Peters⁴⁷² ended the section before with raised arms. Slightly in a forward position, this movement could be perceived as a gesture of asking for help. Singing the first "Everything's coming up Rose," she runs her hands from her breasts, on "Rose," down her body to the hips, then, lifting her arms again up to the lightened advertisement above her. Here, Peters's portrayal can be perceived as if Rose felt herself becoming a star for a few seconds, before once again being overcome by her lack of self-confidence on "This time for me." Underlining her despair with flexed arms and clenched fists repeatedly on each "For me," as Peters did throughout section seven, her Rose becomes the heartbroken mother again. Peters sings three times "For me" before she changes her vocal expression to more of a "demanding" shout with a raspy voice. When she shouts "me" with the vowel much more opened and widened, the three shouted repeats of "me" sound more like "meah," comparable to Lansbury's vowel opening in section six. However, for the last repeat, she lifts her arms wide to the sides, as if to embrace the audience, and belts out the final "me" (this time properly pronounced, giving the vowel its original sound) on the note B above middle C, embracing herself with her arms. She keeps this position for a moment during the following applause and her facial expression shows pain. Even when she finally bows under the applause of the audience, she stays in her interpretation of Rose as a devastated woman and mother. She bows as Rose and not as Peters, with a different body language to that in her concert appearances.⁴⁷³ Peters acts convincingly, but she does not give the audience its "diva moment" that Hammerstein claimed to be one of the most crucial moments for the relationship between the audience and its leading lady.

Although Lansbury does quite the same, it is different in its interpretation, because Lansbury's expression is angrier, which makes her appear less as a victim. Peters's interpretation calls up the audience's pity –

⁴⁷² Sect. eight of Peters's interpret. starts at 5:01; <https://youtu.be/EEPODJzcmJw?t=301>.

⁴⁷³ See for example Bernadette Peters 1998 (full program) Live From Royal Festival Hall London, posted by "Richard D," January 31, 2015. (YouTube: Google LLC), <https://youtu.be/ohMchfoXjlE?t=2675>.

and the audience, always sorry for a victim, might instinctively withholds applause. (From a psychological standpoint, who would applaud a victim?) Even though she (Peters, the Broadway diva) was applauded for this scene after all, this interpretation of such a key character moment might be (arguably) one of the reasons the reaction to her performance was mixed and the reception not strong enough to win her another Tony. However, it would be difficult to criticize her portrayal when it comes to her acting or, even more unassailable, her belting. Of course, the reception of every interpretation of a role is also a question of taste and it is ultimately the audience and critics that make a portrayal successful or not.

In 2008, LuPone⁴⁷⁴ begins this last section by intensifying even further her portrayal of Rose's nervous breakdown between rage and madness. She keeps the tempo without rushing, sings with a full, resonating belt voice up to "this time for me," and changes more and more into shouting, then screaming, all the way through the fifth "For me." While she acts with her eyes wide open, and as if gasping for air, she looks furiously angry, as if going crazy as she repeats "for me." Then she becomes LuPone, the elite Broadway Belt again, who knows exactly how to belt out the last "for me" with the maximum vocal quality. She sings "for" much longer than all the others and with a very open "o" vowel; then she colors the "e" sound of "me" into a much wider "eah" sound, as in "yeah." After holding the belt tone on B-flat for over two bars (longer than written in the score and comparable to Merman),⁴⁷⁵ she ends on the orchestral fermata by sliding upwards into the vowel "e" of "me," which she screams out in the very last seconds, looking madly into the audience. Here is the difference between LuPone's and Merman's last tone: Merman would *always* end on a loud, strong belt tone, not allowing any character to ruin *her* big finale. LuPone ends her finale getting back into the character, just shortly after having left it (in terms of vocal technique) in favor of a solid belt tone.

This combination of being the Broadway Belt who knows what to do vocally on a musical phrase in order to belt out strongly and moving

474 Sect. eight of LuPone's interpret. starts at 5:07; <https://youtu.be/N9HLw7m6dCo?t=307>.

475 Styne, Laurens, and Sondheim, *Gypsy – Original Vocal Score*. 183.

as quickly as possible back into the portrayal of the character corresponds perfectly to what Abbotson calls the "complex creative conundrum"⁴⁷⁶ the creatives had to face in writing the character Rose. As Abbotson states:

As a show business story, *Gypsy* provided its creators with opportunities to utilize "onstage" lives as well as "offstage" lives. One wonders where performance starts and ends, which is to say what part of Mama Rose is real and what part is a lie? [...] The challenge for the show's creators was to explore these contradictions, truthfully and with detail, while at the same time retaining audience interest and sympathy.⁴⁷⁷

While Abbotson describes the delineation between reality and lie as a challenge for the creative team, I would argue that this is an even bigger challenge for the respective Broadway Belt: The only moment the character Rose *seems* to have an "onstage life" is in her daydream in "Rose's Turn"; otherwise she has no real "onstage life" for herself. She is just the stage mother who interrupts auditions and jumps on stage when props are missing and does not risk personal failure onstage. Nevertheless, while not willing to share their failures, Rose considers her children's success to be hers.

Contrary to the character, the Broadway Belt takes the risk of failing in the portrayal of Rose: Merman could have failed through a lack of acting; Lansbury could have failed through her vocal limitations; Daly's potential for success was limited due to her lack of a Broadway diva reputation; Peters's success suffered through Mendes's direction, considered by some to be poorly conceived; and LuPone's mad and furious Rose could have failed to please the audience in being *too* intense. Also, the character Rose's "offstage life" – in the sense of having private moments – does not really exist since she is *always* looking for new challenges to push her daughters' careers and *always* trying to

⁴⁷⁶ Abbotson, *Modern American Drama: Playwriting in the 1950s: Voices, Documents, New Interpretations*. 149.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid. 149-150.

find money to do so.⁴⁷⁸ The only moments Rose is – apparently – not doing something for her daughters are her moments with Herbie. However, even if her feelings for Herbie are strong and real, she is, first of all, interested in him as an agent for her daughters: When she bewitches him with the song “Small World” and flirts with him in “You’ll Never Get Away from Me,” she above all does these things to convince him to stay with her on the road. The moment Herbie announces that he will leave her at last, Rose can only tell him that she *needs* him for “a million things,”⁴⁷⁹ not that she loves him. Hence, she admits that his usefulness as an agent was always more important than being the man by her side. Her “offstage” life was all about putting her children on stage, and nothing else.

Abbotson questioning “what part of Mama Rose is real and what part is a lie?”⁴⁸⁰ implies also the audience’s dilemma in how to look at Rose. Although the audience admires their Broadway divas portraying Rose, the character is originally conceived as the “monstrous stage mother,” a more or less hateful human being. Consequently, the Broadway Belt has a narrow tightrope to walk if she is to accomplish the goal of portraying the character Rose convincingly as a “monster” and yet remain the beloved Broadway diva.

As this analysis shows, these five Broadway divas portrayed Rose corresponding to their major talent and their actor’s personage (and following the direction of Robbins, Laurents, or Mendes). As different as these Broadway divas are, audiences and critics left (and still leave) no doubt about each belter’s high-quality artistic portrayal of Rose, even though each was criticized at some point.⁴⁸¹ But what makes it possible that these Broadway musical performers, with such different actor’s personages and different talents, could each deliver a convincing portrayal of the same character? The “Grain of the Voice” or the “Je Ne Sais

⁴⁷⁸ Even if it happens *offstage*, she steals her father’s gold plate, the hotel’s blankets, and the silver in the Chinese restaurant to put her children *on stage*. See Laurents, *Gypsy – A Musical Fable*, 1-2-12, 1-6-28, 1-7-40.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid. 2-4-38.

⁴⁸⁰ Abbotson, *Modern American Drama: Playwriting in the 1950s: Voices, Documents, New Interpretations*. 149.

⁴⁸¹ As mentioned, Merman was criticized for her lack of acting, Lansbury and Daly for their singing, Peters for being miscast and LuPone for her interpretation Off-Broadway.

Quoi?" I would argue that the major reason is a perfect combination of the character Rose, as created by Laurents, Styne, and Sondheim, with the actor's personage of each Broadway Belt. The elite Broadway musical performer merges with the different layers of Rose's character by operating in three different performance modes (as described by Bert O. States, see chapter 3.3.2). *Gypsy* is a star vehicle; thus portraying Rose needs a strong *self-expressive mode* from each performer, showing what each Broadway Belt is able to do to merit recognition as a Broadway diva.⁴⁸² Then, *Gypsy*'s story is the story of Rose's life – what the character does and what happens to her. To tell her story, the performer's portrayal turns into the *representational mode*. The performer portraying Rose has to merge with the character at this point, so that "all of the actor's energies now seem to bend toward 'becoming' his character, and, for the audience, they cease to be artistic energies and become the facts of his character's nature."⁴⁸³ Finally, since the character Rose, created as the "monster" stage mother, is a problematic role model, each performer uses the *collaborative mode* to protect her image as the Broadway diva that the audience admires. Thus, by ending "Rose's Turn" as the elite Broadway Belt, not as the character Rose – even though it might be for only a few seconds – the performer breaks down the distance between the performer and audience.⁴⁸⁴ In this moment, the audience recognizes the celebrated Broadway diva and realizes that she is "just" acting to portray Rose as a complex, always difficult, sometimes horrible person, but one who is human: flawed and yearning and deeply hurt. This moment of seeing the character "side by side" with the diva, rather than in the same body, helps the audience "love" the character despite her notable flaws, and leads them to sense the virtuosity of the moment and celebrate the diva's performance to an even greater extent. The audience admires "her" Broadway diva now even more – even though

⁴⁸² The diva performs using her actor's personage *and* the talent that made her a star (see chapter 3.2). "In the self-expressive mode, the actor *seems* to be performing on his own behalf" [emphasis by the author]. See Bert O. States, "The Actor's Presence: Three Phenomenal Modes," *Theatre Journal* – The Johns Hopkins University Press 35, no. 3, The Poetics of Theatre (1983), 361.

⁴⁸³ Ibid. 369.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid. 365.

the respective diva's actor's personage, to one extent or another, might leave a doubt as to whether or not she is a little bit like Rose after all....

The reason Hammerstein advised the production's creative team during previews to structure the end of "Rose's Turn" to allow the audience to applaud *Merman*, not Rose, is the same reason why each Broadway diva gives her portrayal of Rose a personal note for a short moment, performing in the collaborative mode: However interesting and challenging the character Rose is, and however impressive the performer's portrayal might be, the audience needs to recognize the Broadway *diva* through the character. Even a *star* cannot be enough to fulfill the audience's expectations. Recurring to the term "diva" as a social construct built from the successful star and the actor's personage (as argued at the beginning of chapter 3), the answer to Abbotson wondering "where performance starts and ends"⁴⁸⁵ is: It does not end. The actor's personage of each of these divas is as strong as the character Rose itself, and no one in the audience will ever know how much Broadway diva lies in the character Rose and how much Rose mirrors in each Broadway diva.

Finally, it is crucial to remember the close relationship between the Broadway diva and her actor's personage: Each of these elite Broadway divas also has interpreted Rose as closely as possible to her actor's personage: Merman's offstage image of the brassy lady corresponded partially to the character Rose; consequently, the audience could perceive Merman's actor's personage in her portrayal of Rose, even though Merman's brassy image was not so bad that it could correspond precisely to a negative role model like the character Rose. Thus the audience assumed that Merman was *acting* the bad side of Rose's character and celebrated her for belting *and* acting. Since Merman's "loud but honest" actor's personage was so big, in the end every character she portrayed was exclusively written for her.⁴⁸⁶ Lansbury remains recognizable behind her portrayal of Rose as the always-classy character actress. Having avoided throughout her career falling into "campy pitfalls" (see chapter 3.1.2), Lansbury is accepted by the audience as an actress exercising her

⁴⁸⁵ Abbotson, *Modern American Drama: Playwriting in the 1950s: Voices, Documents, New Interpretations*. 149.

⁴⁸⁶ Dolly in *Hello, Dolly!* was her only role she did *not* originate, even so, originally designated to be written for her.

talent behind each character she portrays. Daly's actor's personage corresponds to the image of the strong and independent working mother and police detective Mary Lacey whom she played on television, an association that cannot be erased in her portrayal of Rose. In a certain way, the audience came more to see the character Mary Lacey portraying the character Rose, than Daly doing so. (The same would probably have happened for Lansbury, if her portrayal as Jessica Fletcher in the television series *Murder, She Wrote* had been televised and transmitted before she portrayed Rose.)

For Peters, who considers each interpretation as a "deeply personal one"⁴⁸⁷ (as mentioned in chapter 3.1.2), her actor's personage unavoidably shines through when she portrays Rose, creating an interpretation of the character that is much more fragile, more likely to be heartbroken and devastated than the other four Broadway belters. Even in her concerts, the audience remembers her renditions as fragile Mabel in *Mack and Mabel*, romantically deceived Emma in *Song and Dance*, or Seurat's headstrong, but feminine mistress and muse, Dot, in *Sunday in the Park with George*. In contrast, LuPone's portrayal of a furious Rose corresponds perfectly to the LuPone known for stopping a Broadway performance of *Gypsy* in 2008 mid-show to yell at a woman taking pictures.⁴⁸⁸ LuPone's redoubtable actor's personage is so well known that it provoked corresponding comments on this YouTube video about her rendition of "Rose's Turn": YouTuber Steve Jump wrote, "This person making this video was taking her life into her hands"; Megan Hoffman asked "How did someone get away with a camera on Patti?" and Aubrey Hart commented, "You're damn lucky she didn't see you recording this."⁴⁸⁹ Nevertheless, her audience loves LuPone, even for her "Italian temperament" on- and offstage – and especially for being the Broadway diva she is, with all her elite qualities in acting and belting.

Thus what Abbotson calls the creatives' challenge "to explore these contradictions, truthfully and with detail, while at the same time retain-

⁴⁸⁷ Bernadette Peters cit. in Gans, "From the Archives: Bernadette Peters Joined the Sisterhood of Roses With the 2003 *Gypsy* Revival".

⁴⁸⁸ Gajanan, "Patti LuPone Snatches Phone from Texter during Shows for Days Play".

⁴⁸⁹ *Patti LuPone – 'Rose's Turn' – 2008 Broadway, 5:46*.

ing audience interest and sympathy,”⁴⁹⁰ corresponds exactly to the life-time challenge of a Broadway belter’s career, on- and offstage: The Broadway star becomes a diva if she remains true to the actor’s personage as perceived by the audience. Thus, from the moment she has her first big success due to her talent and skills, the Broadway star has to build the *diva image the audience wants to see* and to keep fighting for the audience’s interest and sympathy for the rest of her career.

In summary, once a Broadway Belt has reached the status of a Broadway diva, she can be described as a quite contradictory phenomenon: LuPone has kept the audience interested through the choice of diva roles that followed her first big success in *Evita* and her unpredictable actor’s personage: Even though she consistently neglects the diva image offstage, her outbursts define her as one (even occasionally as a b-diva, as mentioned in chapter 3.3.2) and the audience admires her for being so capricious. Every role Peters portrays has something fragile and vulnerable; the audience loves that Peters is repeatedly confirmed to be overly sensitive (“That’s me! That’s me!” – as mentioned in chapter 3.1.2), even though her offstage image corresponds to an independent, strong woman pursuing her career without compromise. Daly gained sympathy and interest through the feminist character Lacey in the television series *Cagney & Lacey*, but the tough television detective was probably too much of a contrast to the notorious stage mother Rose, limiting her success on Broadway in that role. Lansbury’s always sympathetic actor’s personage does not correspond to all of her portrayals in Broadway musicals; however, this has not hindered her success, as the actor’s chops that allow her to stretch beyond this personage and take on challenging roles have kept her interesting throughout her career. Merman’s “loud but honest” actor’s personage was as big as her voice, which ensured the audience’s fascination and love until the end of her life.

Every Broadway production of *Gypsy* shows that the audience celebrates their Broadway divas and loves to see them in such a diva musical. The financial success of diva musicals (as exemplified with *Hello Dolly!*) confirms their necessity for Broadway musical theatre as part

⁴⁹⁰ Abbotson, *Modern American Drama: Playwriting in the 1950s: Voices, Documents, New Interpretations*. 150.

of the American entertainment business – as long as there exist Broadway divas to appear in them. Since the challenge for a Broadway Belt to become and remain a Broadway diva depends artistically on her star vehicles, creatives need to write new diva musicals to resurrect the Broadway Belt as a pillar of Broadway musical theatre; one cannot exist without the other.

However, I showed that the Broadway Belt can only become a Broadway diva if her actor's personage stands for a strong, independent woman with feminist attributes. Scaling up the picture, a Broadway Belt fighting for her diva status throughout her career corresponds to every woman fighting for gender and racial equality and a more equitable place in the social order. The Broadway Belt has a representative position as a cultural symbol in the ongoing discussion to advance equality in U.S. society.

To be able to continually fight these battles, a Broadway Belt needs creators of Broadway musicals to remember that the loudest voice reaches further than any technical effect. The strongest voice Broadway musical theatre can ever have, is the voice of the Broadway Belt.

5 Conclusion

First and foremost, the Broadway Belt is a female performer, singing, acting, and dancing in Broadway musical theatre. However, while a person can make a study of each of these skills and even earn degrees, there is no curriculum to accomplish to become a Broadway Belt, so honored with that title by creatives, audiences, and critics. The Broadway Belt remains an idiosyncratic phenomenon in Broadway musical theatre, hard to pin down with a definition, yet crucial for the genre's past, present, and future. Beyond this, as a participant in the formation of America's cultural identity, the Broadway Belt represents American women's social status and, as such, sheds a light on American society's unsolved problems concerning gender, ethnicity, and equal rights.

It has been the aim of this dissertation not only to analyze the discourse about the belt voice, its sound and vocal technique, but also to focus on the public appearance of the woman behind the Broadway star and diva, and her perception as a popular member of American society. This analysis of the Broadway Belt and her roles on stage, taking into account her actor's personage (as defined by David Graver¹) on- and offstage, and examined through a historical lens, has exposed a close connection to the American waves of feminism driving forward American feminism, and has helped to reveal the Broadway belter's crucial position in the changing landscape of Broadway musical theatre.

One hundred years ago, on August 18, 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution granted women the right to vote. However, on America's musical theatre stages, women could see the evolution of their position much earlier. This evolution began at the end of the 19th century when female performers aimed for fame and success in vaudeville theatre. White female performers, referred to as "coon shouters," played a crucial role in deploying strong female characters in American musical theatre through their new performance style, developed from the mockery of African Americans in white men's minstrelsies. As demonstrated, the theatre's de-masculinization happened

¹ See Graver, "The Actor's Bodies."

on stage and off: Female spectators idolized female performers who portrayed self-confident, independent women, belting out their songs and setting an artistic counterpoint to classically-trained singers. These belting performers attracted a new middle-class audience, composed of native-born Americans (descendants of earlier immigrants), new immigrants, and even a part of the upper-class audience, fans who would not allow themselves to miss the performance of vaudeville stars like Emma Carus, May Irwin, Eva Tanguay, Sophie Tucker, and Fanny Brice, to name just a few. These belters' successes lured classically-trained singers like Lillian Russell to appear in vaudeville, too. Thus, in American musical theatre, American cultural identity remained collective despite class separation, due to the audience's interest and the conglomeration of styles. This phenomenon leads me to challenge Paul Dimaggio and Michael Useem's point of view² that class-related artistic traditions can be kept over generations through the evolution of cultural preferences. Entertainment that appealed to disparate social groups was more profitable for U.S. society, and its commercialization more important than class affiliation. Additionally, in keeping with Ethan Mordden,³ looking at the stardom of celebrated coon shouters followed by early Broadway musical belters, American musical theatre was clearly a women's business – at a time when American women's social status still was oppressed by men. When, in 1917, the first woman entered the United States Congress, belting female musical performers had already dominated American musical theatre outside opera and operetta for many years. From a sociological point of view, belters in musical theatre gave American women an early, strong voice as independent beings through their portrayals on stage.

However, it was not only white female vaudeville belters advocating feminism. So did African Americans, but they had another road to take to enter show business. It has been the purpose of my survey of African-American feminism to demonstrate that African-American women not only had to fight for women's rights but also to be acknowl-

² Dimaggio and Michael, "Social Class and Arts Consumption – The Origins and Consequences of Class Differences in Exposure to the Arts in America." 142.

³ Mordden, *Broadway Babies – The People Who Made The American Musical*. 49.

edged to have the same rights as white women: At the beginning of feminism, the abolition movement and women's movement had joined forces – especially with the end of the Civil War in 1865 – but only until African-American men (*no women*, whether white or African-American) were granted the right to vote in 1870. When white feminists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton⁴ expressed their superiority to African-American men, they became responsible for feminism separating into white feminism and African-American feminism. From this time on, the intersectionality of anti-feminism and racism became a lasting social problem, and it is a crucial point of my results that this problem has been reflected in Broadway musical theatre and affected particularly the African-American Broadway Belt.

On the vaudeville stage, African-American belters appeared as up-to-date coon shouters in concurrence with white female blackfaced performers but soon found their own identity as blues and jazz singers. Many African-American belters, for example, Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Clara Smith became famous as recording artists, while in the theaters, segregation was still alive: they had to enter and leave through the back door. White performers imitated these women's natural belting style (based on the shout, as mentioned in chapter 2.1.3), and their vocal characteristics became known as "singing with a black voice." This expression is still in use for voices of white belters integrating blues and jazz elements and African-American vocal expressions in their singing. While this development among white singers first seemed to conform to the conventional thinking that belting is exclusively based on African-American singing habits, I demonstrated that, from at first imitating African Americans, white belters created their own belting style for American musical theatre and never intended to copy the African-American singing style completely.

At the rise of Broadway musical theatre, African Americans created their own shows, and the craze for jazz and ragtime brought so-called black musicals to theaters, although only a few became successful. Also, the success of some African-American versions of musicals that originally had an exclusively white cast could not conceal the fact that turn-

⁴ See Daniels, "Trouble With White Feminism: Racial Origins of U.S. Feminism".

ing a white musical into a black musical is not *integration*. Even though blues singer Ethel Waters was the first African-American singer with her own television show, multiracial casts began to appear only slowly on the Broadway musical stage, marked by *Showboat* in 1927. As observed by Larry Stempel,⁵ African-American musical performers existed, but they were not relevant. After *Showboat* in 1927, it needed another 35 years before Diahann Carroll became the first African-American female performer to win a Tony as an actress in a leading role in the 1962 musical *No Strings*. Even though her role included an interracial relationship, the musical's story did not emphasize her ethnicity, which was revolutionary at a time when racism was part of everyday life. During my research, I became more and more aware that performers of color are still today a minority in Broadway musical theatre, generally appearing in cliché roles or as part of mainly African-American casts in respective productions. In chapter three, I treated this subject independently, but in this conclusion, I would like to put this problem in direct connection to anti-feminism in Broadway musical theatre, representing the idea that these issues, at first glance only tangentially related, are in fact two of the biggest intersectional problems in American society.

At the same time that the 1920s jazz craze facilitated African Americans entering musical theatre, Broadway musical theatre's young creatives, white men like George Gershwin, Cole Porter, Jerome Kern, and Irving Berlin, searched for a new vocal sound for the theaters on Broadway, a boulevard also known as the *Great White Way*. Even though that title refers to the bright illumination of the strip and has no specifically racially charged history, Broadway musical theatre was, indeed, the business of white people. With vaudeville theatre dying, Broadway musical theatre developed, and it was the white singer Ethel Merman who became the first to be honored with the title Broadway Belt, in 1930.

Contrary to the conventional approach of discussing Merman exclusively as the iconic Broadway Belt due to her loud belt voice and impeccable projection and enunciation, I presented another perspective of Merman, who not only remained the archetype of a Broadway diva throughout her career but pioneered second-wave feminism through

⁵ Stempel, *Showtime – A History of the Broadway Musical Theater*. 85.

her actor's personage. In star vehicles exclusively written for her, Merman portrayed on stage women that Stacey Wolf⁶ points to as independent characters managing their own lives and careers, thus *feminist* characters. Offstage, Merman lived a remarkably similar life to some of her most iconic characters: a four-times-divorced, successful, self-determined, independent woman, staying true to herself. My findings show that – even though she had grown up in a middle-class neighborhood – Merman was rather idolized by middle-class women who had originated in the working class and could easily identify with her: As a direct successor of female vaudeville belters, who had risen from the working class, Merman reinforced her image of being brassy, uncultured, even common⁷ through her actor's personage, which I will describe further in concluding the discussion of the star's actor's personage and her so-called diva roles. Nevertheless, as argued in chapter 3, even though Merman was not actively involved in feminism, she had a crucial cultural impact on a rising feminist consciousness in American society and represented American women approaching second-wave feminism – but years ahead of its time.

Second-wave feminism focused on changing the way society thought about women, but that focus included African-American women only in a very limited way, and it was the same on Broadway. When Broadway musical theatre had its so-called Golden Age, it was a desert for any other ethnicities than white. As shown in chapter 3.4.2, only two cliché roles in this era brought African-American musical performers a Tony Award (Broadway musical theatre's highest recognition): the character Bloody Mary in *South Pacific*, for Juanita Hall, as best featured actress in a musical in 1950, and the role of Georgina played by Leslie Uggams in *Hallelujah, Baby!*, as best lead actress in 1968. The fact that Uggams received her Tony shortly after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., the most crucial spokesperson in the period's Civil Rights Movement, might serve as a reminder that her achievement needs to be recognized as a giant leap forward for African-American musical perfor-

⁶ Wolf, *Changed for Good – A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*. Pos. 1148.

⁷ "She [Merman] was also common..." Arthur Laurents cit. in Bryer and Davison, *The Art of the American Musical – Conversations with the Creators*. 137.

mers, even though (as demonstrated above) it was only a small step for African-American women in U.S. society.

Until the third wave of feminism began to rise early in the 1990s, the position of the Broadway Belt had to bear major changes: The introduction of amplification into Broadway musical theatre made naturally loud voices such as Merman's dispensable, and creatives began to prioritize acting talent over a big singing voice. This led to a new perspective of a belt voice as being not necessarily just a loud singing voice, but instead a woman's voice that had something to say; this perception put the belt voice, as used for the interpretation of more complex characters in Broadway musical theatre, in the direct social context of women *raising their voices* to express how they felt when it came to the lack of equal rights.

Being a skilled actress able to portray unconventional characters allowed Lansbury, with her idiosyncratic voice, to join the line of Broadway belters – and to raise her voice for feminism. While at first sight it might not be obvious what makes Lansbury a Broadway Belt and a feminist – certainly it was neither for her voice nor for her actor's personage – my analysis of the relationship of her actor's personage to her roles and to audiences and critics brought interesting results: Lansbury's actor's personage always came across as *classy*, on- and offstage. Her feminine image satisfied both middle-class and upper-middle-class audiences, for example in her portrayal of a self-confident, independent woman mothering her nephew in the 1966 musical *Mame*. Portraying feminist roles and maintaining offstage the image of a good mother and wife, Lansbury pleased a feminist audience as much as she did the typical middle-class couple attending a Broadway musical. Such a feminine twist influenced the emotional and political outcome of her appearance and even the musical itself (Wolf makes a similar argument⁸). As a popular actress, Lansbury's feminine actor's personage and the audiences' and critics' perception of her certainly helped to keep feminism alive even though the feminist movement suffered a crucial backlash in the Reagan era of the 1980s.

⁸ Wolf, *Changed for Good – A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*. Pos. 1148.

Another substantial change for the Broadway Belt during the 1970s came through the rise of dance musicals and, specifically, the introduction of body mikes, a crucial technical progression in amplification. As early as 1957, dancers were cast for leading parts in *West Side Story*. Coached in singing and acting, their voices were now amplified through stage microphones (also called foot mikes) that were positioned aside the footlights in front of the stage. Due to technical progress and changing aesthetics in the landscape of Broadway musical theatre, the evolving question was how, or even whether, the Broadway Belt could maintain a crucial position in Broadway musical theatre even though the belt voice was no longer necessarily her primary talent. The answer to this question was the triple threat. At first glance, the belt voice lost its importance for Broadway musical theatre; belting and acting while moving a little bit in front of stage microphones was no longer enough. In 1975, the invention of body microphones amplified each voice in the musical *A Chorus Line* separately, and, from then on, even dancers with small voices could be heard throughout the theater from every corner of the stage. Gwen Verdon, born in 1925, the same year as Lansbury, and Chita Rivera, eight years younger, are the most celebrated triple threats of the 20th century. Hard-working women, tireless in developing their skills, these performers also portrayed strong female characters – such as Verdon as Lola in *Damn Yankees* in 1955 and Roxie in *Chicago* in 1975, and Rivera as Anita in *West Side Story* and Velma in *Chicago*. Side by side, Rivera and Verdon's performances in *Chicago* as two murderesses able to manipulate their way out of prison certainly has a feminist spin, at least with a wink. Even though elite dancers usually remain limited to portrayals that demand their dancing skills, Verdon's and Rivera's multiple Tony-winning performances gave a new distinction to the Broadway Belt: From the 1970s on, dancing became crucial for lead parts and elite triple threats joined the line of singers and actors as Broadway belters. Nevertheless – as established in chapter 2.4.2 – despite triple threats and dance-centric shows, the belt voice has remained crucial for the performance of a musical's biggest numbers and thus for the musical's success. Additionally, and especially during a time when feminism was essentially declared dead, the unconventional voice of a Broadway Belt

singing loudly (by nature or thanks to miking) represented women not giving up in pursuing their goal of equal rights in the U.S. social order.

The third influential change in Broadway musical theatre's aesthetics during the 1970s was the concept musical (covered previously in chapter 3.2.5). Based on one idea or theme instead of a story or play, the concept musical brought creatives new artistic satisfaction. Many of these concept musicals were at first commercial failures – remarkably, this is true of most of those by Stephen Sondheim, who subsequently became celebrated as the most influential composer and lyricist of the 20th-century Broadway musical theatre. First, I needed to question why many elite Broadway belters are excited to be cast for a Sondheim musical. These musicals are no star vehicles, neither for an up-and-coming musical performer nor for a recognized Broadway Belt. Written for *connoisseurs* (according to David Walsh and Len Platt⁹), they cannot propel the career of a newcomer, and an elite Broadway Belt is likely to find more *artistic* than *public* recognition in portraying a role in a concept musical, such as Nellie Lovett in *Sweeney Todd* in 1979 and Dot in *Sunday in the Park with George* in 1984. Certainly, as discussed by Laurie Winer,¹⁰ Sondheim's female characters were designated to redefine the ideal of femininity, but roles in concept musicals are usually not diva roles a Broadway Belt needs to define herself – another argument I will address shortly. However, many elite belters jump at the chance to portray one of Sondheim's idiosyncratic characters to demonstrate their outstanding acting talent in portraying more intellectualized characters than in a typical diva role. Additionally, concept musicals do offer, at least sometimes, one song that lets a Broadway Belt shine, like "The Ladies Who Lunch" in *Company*, eternalized by Elaine Stritch (even though her rendition was not honored with a Tony Award). While I have pointed out that concept musicals have had a certain responsibility for the diminishment of the Broadway belter's position in musical theatre, the shows have not obliterated the performer's importance for belting out the *one* song that frequently outshines the musical itself.

⁹ Walsh and Platt, *Musical Theater and American Culture*. 146.

¹⁰ Winer, "Why Sondheim's Women Are Different."

The counterpart to Sondheim's intricate concept musicals in the changing aesthetics of Broadway musical theatre was constituted by the double threat of rock musicals and the British invasion of the megamusical. Even though some rock musicals were revolutionary – like composer Galt MacDermot's *Hair* from 1967, whose songs were sung in the context of the anti-Vietnam War peace movement, and *Jesus Christ Superstar*, which in 1970 introduced composer Andrew Lloyd Webber to Broadway – it was the new subgenre called "megamusical" that dominated Broadway in the 1980s up into the new millennium. Megamusicals, with characters portrayed by easily interchangeable performers, allow only the Broadway Belt *originating* a portrayal to gain recognition. Parts like Grizabella in *Cats* and Kim in *Miss Saigon* brought Betty Buckley and Lea Salonga worldwide recognition as elite belters, but these performers could not develop a career on Broadway comparable to those of Merman and Lansbury. As in concept musicals, in a megamusical the voice remains the focus for the *one* crucial song to belt out, but as demonstrated in chapter 4.2, such a song does not allow the Broadway belters of a new generation to build their actor's personage. To stay with the examples of *Cats* and *Miss Saigon*, an old dying cat and a young, single Vietnamese mother who commits suicide, are not feminist roles and cannot help to establish an actor's personage as publicly speaking out for women's rights.

One of the last so-called diva roles (I will come back to the term *diva* later in this conclusion) performed on Broadway in the last millennium was Eva Perón in *Evita* in 1979, portrayed by Patti LuPone. Widely recognized for the sound of her belt voice, often compared to the sound of Merman's (40 years her senior), LuPone also walked in the footsteps of Merman as she portrayed some of her most iconic roles – and presented an equally brassy actor's personage offstage. Contrary to Merman, LuPone takes a strong feminist position in public and uses her public outbursts without hesitation to take political positions and to defend women's rights. However, even though LuPone can be considered as the archetype of a new generation of Broadway belters, she could not develop a career comparable to Merman's. The odds were against her – as they were against Broadway musical theatre in general: Confirming her claim to have been born too late for Broadway musi-

cal theatre's best years, LuPone had to wait 28 years after *Evita* to win another Tony, for her portrayal of Rose in *Gypsy* in 2008. At least, along the way she earned two Tony nominations, one of these for the portrayal of Reno Sweeney in *Anything Goes* in 1988, which was especially remarkable at the time when Broadway musical theatre was entering a period when it was lamented as dead.¹¹

Miraculously saved by mega- and corporate musicals, the last chiefly due to Disney, who transformed some successful cartoon movies into Broadway musicals, the world of Broadway musical theatre became a multimillion-dollar entertainment business – and nearly no one in the audience cared who appeared (or didn't) in these shows full of technical special effects. Additionally, the trend to center plots around male characters, like Valjean, the Jersey Boys, and nearly the complete cast of *Newsies*, pushed aside the Broadway Belt as the female icon of Broadway musical theatre. Nevertheless, even these musicals needed female musical performers belting their hearts out in a featured role, like Fantine or Eponine in *Les Misérables*. Unfortunately, performers in these roles were hardly recognized for their skills and talent, disappearing in the shadow of celebrated production teams and technical show effects. As argued in chapter 3.2.5, in Broadway's most difficult time, the 1980s, only elite belters who were lucky enough to appear in revivals of star vehicles could defend the status of the Broadway Belt as one of the most crucial figures in Broadway musical theatre during the 20th century; only they could carry the torch through the 1990s and then into the new millennium.

One of these belters was Carol Channing, by 28 years the senior of LuPone. Channing originated the character Dolly in the 1964 Broadway musical *Hello Dolly!* She stood for the “unsinkable” Broadway Belt by portraying Dolly in its first run and two Broadway revivals, the last in 1996, at age 75. Channing had become a Broadway musical icon as early as 1949, when she was 28, originating Lorelei Lee in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. At first sight, this portrayal corresponded perfectly to Channing and does not seem to forward the feminist cause, as discussed in chapter 3.4.1. However, Channing created her actor's per-

¹¹ See for example Jessica Sternfeld cit. in Dvoskin, “The Postwar Musical” 392.

sonage to match her audience's tastes and expectations, putting on the image of being "blond and dumb,"¹² like Lorelei does until she reveals her real personality to her father-in-law. Yet this was not the real Channing: With her portrayal of Dolly – originally conceived as a new star vehicle for Merman – she cemented her Broadway stardom and added a certain maturity to her actor's personage. Her offstage appearance corresponded completely to her portrayal as Dolly, and, as argued in the same chapter, her quirky appearance on- and offstage, underlined by her raspy voice, gave her actor's personage a unique feminist twist: While on the one hand, her image resembled more a comic version of Lansbury, on the other hand, she used her idiosyncratic actor's personage during the time of the second wave of feminism to raise feminist consciousness, as Amber Frost¹³ has pointed out. Additionally, I underlined that in her later years, Channing's actor's personage supported third-wave feminism even more. Ahead of her time, like Merman was ahead of hers, Channing took an active part in the revitalization of feminism and helped to redefine it. She even said she wanted to serve as an example to young women when, in 1998, she asked for a divorce from Charles Lowe after 42 years of marriage, a relationship that she declared to be abusive. Certainly, the Anita Hill sexual harassment case that launched third-wave feminism in 1991 had more political weight in American society, but as demonstrated in chapter 3.4.1, Channing's feminist impact as a Broadway musical icon and her cultural status as a Broadway Belt should not be overlooked.

Even though Channing's father was multiracial (African American and Euro American), she was not considered to be African American and her exercised feminism did not influence African-American feminism, neither in society nor on stage. Nevertheless, her name appears occasionally on different listings of Tony winners with African-American roots, which only highlights the lack of recognition for African-American belters. Indeed, from 1968 (the year Martin Luther King, Jr. was shot and African-American performer Leslie Uggams won

12 Expression in reference to *Carol and Goldie Sing About Blondes – Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In – George Schlatter*, 3:01.

13 Frost, "Carol Channing Delivers A Beautiful Feminist Tirade Against Housework (You Know, For The Kids)".

a Tony), it was six years before African-American performer Virginia Capers would win a Tony as lead actress in *Raisin* and then another eight years before Jennifer Halliday's portrayal of Effie White in *Dreamgirls* would be honored with a Tony in 1982 – the last at least not a role as a maid or slave. Still, things had changed very little for African-American belters. As was the case for African-American performers in black musicals 60 years earlier, African-American performers existed on Broadway, but were still primarily considered for explicitly African-American portrayals and were not equally significant to white performers. Color-blind and color-conscious casting occurred for the revivals of *West Side Story* in 1980 and *Sweet Charity* in 1986; however, Debbie Allen, the central performer for both shows (portraying Anita and Charity Hope Valentine, respectively), remembers well that racism was as much alive, as African-American feminism had been compromised due to the backlash against feminism in general that occurred in the 1980s. In fact, my research uncovered that this backlash put African-American feminism nearly back into the 1960s, a time when Leslie Uggams said she needed to be careful what she did and said.¹⁴ First-cast lead parts for African-American belters have remained cliché roles up into the 21st century, but at least they are now more often portrayals of strong-willed women fighting for racial justice and freedom. Like the characters she portrays on stage, an African-American Broadway Belt fights offstage for gender and racial fairness, but additionally still has to fight for equal rights and equal pay compared to white women in her discipline.

For other ethnicities, like Asian Americans, the situation was and still is, even worse, leaving Lea Salonga, as Kim in *Miss Saigon*, to be the only performer of Asian origin to win a Tony for best actress in a musical from 1991 until the present day, and Ruthie Anne Miles the only Tony winner as featured actress, portraying Lady Thiang in the 2015 revival of *The King and I*. Both parts are cliché roles. This reinforces my argument that the Broadway Belt remains a white phenomenon in the new millennium and, for women of color, problems concerning race and gender remain intersectional.

¹⁴ See Gates Jr., "Leslie Uggams speaks of Fame and 'Roots' with Henry Louis Gates of 'The Root'".

Third-wave feminism in the 1990s celebrated girlishness and sensuality as a new feminist attitude, and Bernadette Peters's actor's personage fitted perfectly in this era. This period is considered by many to have been Broadway musical theatre's lowest point in its history, especially when, as early as in 1985, the categories of Best Actress, and even Best Actor and Best Choreography in a Musical were skipped at the annual Tony Awards, as Laurence Maslon remembers.¹⁵ However, only one year later, Peters won her first Tony for her portrayal as Emma in *Song and Dance*, in 1986, at age 42. Even though she was recognized as an elite Broadway Belt and she had been nominated for four Tonys since 1972, it had taken her 14 years to see her first Tony win. In 1986, her actor's personage, usually considered cute and adorable, finally corresponded to the image the audience wanted to perceive of her, and she was rewarded accordingly. The very next year, her portrayal of The Witch in Sondheim's musical *Into the Woods* in 1987 brought Peters another Tony nomination. However, this show was not a star vehicle and, since star vehicles were virtually nonexistent in the following years, she focused through the 1990s on concert series primarily celebrating songs of Sondheim musicals. Her portrayal of Annie in Irvin Berlin's star vehicle *Annie Get Your Gun* in the 1999 revival finally earned her another Tony award.

In her portrayals, she usually emphasizes femininity, coquettishness, and vulnerability, often giving the character a feminist twist at the very end of the musical. Despite having Italian roots like LuPone (and only one year senior to her), Peters never shows offstage a similar temperament to LuPone, who usually excuses her public outbursts as due to "being Italian." Peters appears offstage always as sweet, nice, sensual, and loveable. However, she consistently emphasizes her female strength and independence through her self-determined lifestyle, not to mention her general preference for Sondheim's unconventional characters (with their redefined femininity, to re-cite Winer). Peters remains the very example of a third-wave feminist, which, as shown in chapter 3.4.1, is not a question of age – as she confirmed at age 70, by maintaining her actor's personage in portraying Dolly in the 2018 revival of *Hello Dolly!* As a Broadway Belt, she walks in the footsteps of Channing, but with

¹⁵ Maslon, *Broadway – The American Musical*. 376.

stronger vocal abilities. Parallel to Peters, elite Broadway belters of the 20th century continue to appear in revivals and – desperately rarely – in new musicals, like LuPone in *War Paint* in 2016.

For African-American belters, strictly speaking, the situation has not changed much since the 1980s: Only a few have won a Tony as a musical's leading lady for their talent, and then only in cliché roles, like LaChanze in 2006 and Cynthia Erivo in 2016, both for their portrayal of Celie in *The Color Purple*. Many African-American Broadway belters who were celebrated for their talent disappeared completely from the Internet Broadway Database, lacking new opportunities after their first big success.

Examining the current state of the art compared to the last few decades of musical theatre development has revealed that a “generation gap” has been provoked through a lack of star vehicles and the Broadway musical's changed aesthetics, a gap that has left Broadway musical theatre without comparable icons to the elite Broadway belters of the 20th century. Megamusicals of the new millennium, like *Wicked*, have produced new Broadway belters that Wolf calls “everyday divas”¹⁶ – elite belters on stage, but lacking an actor's personage offstage to cement their status. Celebrated as a Broadway star during the time they portray their award-winning character, like Idina Menzel as Elphaba in *Wicked*, only their most loyal fans stay interested in her actor's personage after she finishes her run on Broadway. However, as argued in chapter 3.1, a Broadway star cannot become a diva without a strong actor's personage, be it brassy, classy, dollish, quirky, fiery, or sexy. One of the crucial findings of my work is that the lack of star vehicles has provoked a lack of Broadway belters with a strong actor's personage, and megamusicals with characters portrayed by high-quality but easily exchangeable musical performers cannot give birth to new, unconventional Broadway divas. Megamusicals dug a hole in which to bury the Broadway Belt and everyday divas (to recall Wolf) will not be able to replace her. To those who claim that economic factors make the mega-show inevitable, I point out that comparing the profit and attendance data of the 2016–17 *Cats* revival to those of the revival of *Hello Dolly!* in 2017–18 unmasks

¹⁶ Wolf, *Changed for Good – A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*. Pos. 4597.

that even the *commercial* benefit of a star vehicle with an elite Broadway Belt as the leading lady is, in its long-term perspective, more promising than that of a megamusical.

In 2008, according to Jennifer Baumgardner,¹⁷ the fourth wave of feminism began. While the driving force behind this movement is women in their thirties and forties, in Broadway musical theatre, it is mainly still elite Broadway belters of the earlier generation who belt out on stage in revivals with feminist diva roles. Just so did Peters in *Hello Dolly!* in 2018 (as mentioned above) and LuPone in *Company*¹⁸ in 2020, both women in their seventies since 2019 – and, notably, with the latter also continuously and loudly speaking out offstage concerning her political opinions and advocacy for gender equality and diversity. Likewise, Angela Lansbury appeared in 2011 in the first Broadway revival of Sondheim's *A Little Night Music* at age 86 and, even though she did not belt out on stage as she did as Rose in *Gypsy* in 1974, offstage she took part in the public feminist discussion about sexual harassment in show business during the 2017 #MeToo and #TimesUp movements. Although this generation gap was recognized before this dissertation, the situation revealed itself to have more serious consequences for Broadway musical theatre than expected.

For African-American belters, the new millennium offers portrayals of African-American pop stars like Tina Turner and Donna Summer in so-called jukebox musicals, as well as in cliché roles, for example as a maid in *Caroline, or Change* or an abused wife in the first revival of *The Color Purple*. However, as argued in chapter 4.2, it cannot be ignored that copying pop stars as perfectly as possible, especially their iconic belt voices, cannot build new Broadway belters their own actor's personage. (Portraying an African-American pop diva by copying her dancing and singing style might even bring to mind the efforts of the first African-American belters to enter the world of musical theatre as up-to-date coon shouters, imitating idiosyncrasies of their own race.) The fact that, in 2020, more than 75 percent of the theatre industry is still

¹⁷ Baumgardner, "Is There a Fourth Wave? Does it Matter?"

¹⁸ LuPone portrayed Joanne in *Company* on Broadway in nine previews, before its premiere was delayed until December 09, 2021 due to the worldwide corona virus crisis.

white¹⁹ only emphasizes the situation that 21st century Broadway musical theatre continues to lack racial fairness. Foundations like *Women of Color on Broadway* and *The Lillys* advocate for the intersectional problems of gender and ethnicity and fight for equal opportunities and equal pay for women in the theatre and the entertainment business in general. It is one of my most urgent arguments that it would certainly drive racial fairness and equal opportunities for women on Broadway forward if a new, multiracial generation of elite Broadway belters would lend their powerful voices to the stage in new feminist roles and use their actor's personage to speak out loudly offstage for women's rights. This would benefit not only Broadway musical theatre but the broader feminist cause in the U.S.

Discovering the parallels between the development of feminism and the position of the Broadway Belt in the changing landscape of Broadway musical theatre, demanded to look deeper into the actor's personage of the Broadway Belt. Based on David Graver's concept of actor's personage,²⁰ which includes Philip Auslander's concept of persona²¹ combined with the audience's perception of a performer offstage, my critical investigation of the Broadway Belt resulted in a basic categorization by diverse types: the brassy, the classy, the self-aware, and the hard-working actor's personage. This layout revealed that primarily four composers were responsible for the most iconic roles for elite Broadway belters: John Kander, Jerry Herman, Jule Styne, and Stephen Sondheim, and the creation of their leading-lady roles was, in turn, strongly connected to the most iconic elite Broadway belters of the 20th century. These creatives developed a character for a respective performer or created a role that fitted the chosen performer precisely. Certainly, for some elite Broadway belters, crossing over from one type to another only confirmed their talent and the uniqueness of their actor's personage, like Peters portraying Rose in *Gypsy* or Lansbury playing Nellie Lovett in *Sweeney Todd*, as mentioned before. However, when the audience believes it recognizes the musical's character in the respective

¹⁹ See Teeman, "See Us, Trust Us, Employ Us: Broadway's Women of Color on Confronting Racism – and Reshaping Theater".

²⁰ See Graver, "The Actor's Bodies."

²¹ See Auslander, "Musical Personae."

performer's actor's personage (according to Millie Taylor²²), it is difficult for the Broadway Belt to get rid of this image, as it was the case for LuPone after portraying Eva Perón, Channing portraying Lorelei Lee, and Peters playing the roles of Mabel, Emma, and Dot. Nevertheless, each elite Broadway Belt became a star through an oeuvre of one of these creatives and, vice versa, their musicals became star vehicles. One cannot exist without the other.

Consequently, another crucial aspect of the investigation of the actor's personage of a Broadway belter has been to look at their recognition as a star. When Robert Viagas defines Broadway stardom as a combination of artistic achievement and achievement through charisma,²³ he supports the idea that stardom depends on talent and the performer's actor's personage, but he does not specify if this charisma develops from the self-created image or the publicly perceived image. To go further in exploring the Broadway Belt, it is crucial to establish a clear difference between the terms *star* and *diva* for a Broadway Belt (based on Hans-Otto Huegel's²⁴ discourse): A performer becomes a star through achievement on stage, while a diva is a social construct created through the iconic actor's personage of a star performer, visible on- and offstage, and her image, self-created or as publicly perceived. Thus, becoming a star through a lead part in a star vehicle that fits a performer's actor's personage is not quite enough to develop into an elite Broadway Belt. The Broadway Belt needs to be a diva.

As argued in chapter 3.3.1, an elite Broadway Belt develops her actor's personage in accordance with the characters of her – often multiple – Tony-winning roles. As emphasized by Michelle Dvoskin,²⁵ a Broadway belter's portrayals of larger-than-life female characters are considered to be diva roles that are explicitly feminist. Thus I categorized diva roles into Big-Lady diva roles, antihero diva roles and up-and-coming diva roles and showed that a Broadway Belt portraying such a diva role is

22 Taylor and Symonds, *Studying Musical Theatre – Theory and Practice*. 243.

23 Viagas, *I'm the Greatest Star – Broadway's Top Musical Legends from 1900 to Today*. Pos. 22–28.

24 See Huegel, "Diva."

25 See Dvoskin, "Embracing Excess: The Queer Feminist Power of Musical Theatre Diva Roles."

most successful if her actor's personage corresponds to a diva type fitting that role. Further developing Wolf's statement that the diva is an on- and offstage phenomenon,²⁶ and Dvoskin's point that a performer can never completely disappear into a role,²⁷ I demonstrated in chapter 3.3.2, that a Broadway belter's diva type and her respective diva role fertilize each other and function at their best in mutual agreement. It is this combination that makes a Broadway Belt a true diva. In agreement with Dvoskin who underlines that a Broadway diva challenges normative ideas of gender,²⁸ my argument supports the idea that the Broadway Belt portraying diva roles practices gender performance and – in many cases – does so unconventionally. As argued, this is exercised feminism, on stage and off, which confirms the parallels between the Broadway Belt, her actor's personage and roles, and her position regarding feminism.

My case study of the character Rose in *Gypsy* served as an example to test my results. The analysis of Rose as portrayed by Merman in the original production and the following four portrayals by Lansbury, television actress Tyne Daly, Peters, and LuPone in *Gypsy*'s revivals through 2008 showed that the interpretation of each elite Broadway Belt was individual and unique, corresponding not only to the diva type of each performer but also to a feminist gender performance supporting the respective wave of feminism in each era (and in some cases, even ahead of the times). The choice of television feminist icon Daly, instead of a recognized elite Broadway Belt, for the revival of *Gypsy* in 1989 (shortly before the rising third wave of feminism, which extended from the end of the Reagan era through the last decade of the 20th century) supports my argument about the need for a strong, but younger feminist figure to take on this diva role.

Loosely based on events in the life of Rose Hovick during the 1920s, the character Rose created by playwright Arthur Laurents has many layers that each performer exposed according to her actor's person-

²⁶ Wolf, *Changed for Good – A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*. Pos. 4733.

²⁷ See Dvoskin, "Embracing Excess: The Queer Feminist Power of Musical Theatre Diva Roles."

²⁸ Ibid.

age. In keeping with Susan C. W. Abbotson²⁹ and Millie Taylor,³⁰ it is my perspective that audience members perceive the character Rose in each interpretation as “alive”; they superimpose the character onto the respective performer and this challenges the Broadway Belt to find the best possible combination in her portrayal of this diva role, according to her diva status (as perceived by the audience) and her self-created actor’s personage.

Eventually, my analysis of “Rose’s Turn,” *Gypsy*’s eleven o’clock number, as presented in the original version and the four revivals through 2008, concentrated on the talent of each Broadway Belt to give spectators what they were looking for: the possibility of recognizing the Broadway diva *through* the character, even in the fictionalized form of musical theatre. At the end of this song, due to how it is written and staged, each Broadway Belt who plays Rose breaks down the distance between the audience and the performer portraying a character for a few seconds and shows at that moment the Broadway diva, the performer’s offstage actor’s personage as the audience wants to perceive her. In doing so, each performer uses her talent and her actor’s personage to her best ability to deliver a unique interpretation of the character Rose. As shown in chapter 4.4., the most crucial moment in these portrayals of Rose, the moment when each of these stars confirms not only her status as a true Broadway diva but also as a unique musical performer, is the moment the Broadway Belt employs her musical talent using her idiosyncratic belt voice.

Indeed, the opening question for this dissertation concerned the belt voice. In the beginning, my research was concentrated on the origins of the term *to belt out*. After examining the development of belting in early American theatre, I analyzed the belt sound, especially compared to the sound produced by classically-trained voices. My first approach to the vocal expression of belting was to examine the sound qualities that define the principal characteristics of a belt sound. Academics and voice researchers such as Barbara Doscher, Joe Estill, and Robert T. Sat-

²⁹ See Abbotson, *Modern American Drama: Playwriting in the 1950s: Voices, Documents, New Interpretations*.

³⁰ See Taylor and Symonds, *Studying Musical Theatre – Theory and Practice*.

aloft agree on certain specifications of a voice producing a belt sound, but, as shown in chapter 2.2, their work, even taken together, does not come to a satisfactory general definition. Thus my examination focused on the physical components of sound production, loudness, pitch, and timbre, and presented clear differences between belting, singing based on speech patterns, and classical singing.

The ability to be heard over an orchestra without amplification made loudness a crucial factor for early belters. Supported by the results of Johan Sundberg's studies³¹ and based on results of my own work experimenting with the software *Praat*, I argued in chapter 2.2.2 against the general point of view that the belt sound is based on normal speech sound: The sound of a belt voice produces frequencies over 500 Hz, allowing the perception of unamplified belted tones over an unamplified orchestra, which is not the case for normal speech. Additionally, a belt tone's frequency spectrum corresponds to a tone produced by a singing voice and contains the so-called singer's formant, necessary for its sustainability. In accordance with the concept described by Thomas Millhouse and Frantz Clermont,³² that the singer's formant is a phenomenon of acoustics and also of human perception, the second specification of a belt sound consists of the pitch of a tone. In relation to a musical scale or chords, the right pitch makes the difference between the perception of belted tones by a singing voice, versus yelling or screaming. While in classical singing, vocal beauty depends on the physically perfect production of a tone (as argued by Frederic Husler and Yvonne Rood-Marling³³), vocal beauty can be perceived as such in any singing style as soon as sung tones are musical tones, produced on the right pitch to music, and the perception of singing out of tune as vocal ugliness is independent of the respective musical genre. The results of my research also shed light on the belt tone's high energy in first formant frequencies. Along the lines of Sundberg, who explains

³¹ See Sundberg, *The Science of the Singing Voice*.

³² Millhouse and Clermont, "Perceptual Characterisation of the Singer's Formant Region: A Preliminary Study," 258.

³³ Husler and Rodd-Marling, *Singen – Die physische Natur des Stimmorgans – Anleitung zur Ausbildung der Singstimme*, 123.

that the first formant takes part in determining most of the vowel color,³⁴ I examined the third specification of sound besides loudness and pitch, the timbre. Making a voice interesting and recognizable in any singing style, the natural timbre is the individual sound quality of the vocal instrument a singer is born with. Timbre helps the human ear to distinguish sounds with the same pitch and loudness. Demonstrating that a belt voice is more recognizable than a classically-trained voice, which produces tones according to the principles of *voix mixte* (the melting of all voice registers to reach uniformity of the voice), my analysis of the belt sound strongly suggests that natural timbre defines the individual belt sound. Depending on a voice's natural timbre and the given size of a singer's vocal tract, which is responsible for the instrument's natural loudness, a belt voice develops through always singing on the right pitch and keeping this timbre and loudness while extending the voice's range – contrary to the classical voice, which prioritizes the best physical tone production in favor of a uniform sound throughout the voice's range.

These results define a unique belt voice as a voice keeping its natural timbre while producing loud tones on the right pitch to music throughout the voice's range. In my 2009 teaching method for belting, I introduced the terms “low-belt voice,” “high-belt voice,” and “mix-belt voice” to characterize typical belt voices, and here I applied this categorization to elite Broadway belters. For example, Merman, who introduced the belt sound to Broadway musical theatre, has a low-belt voice, limited in its range, but strong and loud throughout this range. Streisand's voice is a good example of a high-belt voice, producing high tones with sharp energy and little vibrato. The mix-belt voice, like Idina Menzel's, able to produce strong tones in the lower *and* higher parts of the voice's range became the new vocal standard in Broadway musical theatre when the changing aesthetics of the genre and the introduction of amplification through body microphones asked for it. The mix-belt voice has a darker timbre on lower tones and a (slightly) brighter voice color on higher tones, although to change from one vocal register to the other is delicate in terms of vocal technique.

³⁴ Sundberg, *The Science of the Singing Voice*. 12.

The mix-belt sound is considered voice abuse by many scholars, phoniatrics, and voice teachers, leading to the next point in investigating the belt voice: The relationship between nature's gift and vocal technique in belting. I examined *Bel canto* technique in relation to belting and questioned its usefulness to achieve the belt sound. Voice researchers like Sundberg, cooperating with Margareta Thalén, and Christianne Roll suggest that belting could be unhealthy and inconsistent, as well as difficult to handle in voice teaching, but life-long careers of elite Broadway belters and their discourse about their voices confirm the existence of some vocal-technical patterns for healthy belting. It has been the purpose of recognized voice teachers such as Rachel Lebon, Jeanette LoVetri, Jeannie Gagné, Susan Bordman, and Catherine Sadolin to explain the belt sound through commenting on its perception, but I showed the inconsistency in their descriptions of the sound and how to teach it. This does not mean, however, that their teaching methods are wrong: Any method that keeps a singer's voice healthy, teaching voice placement for singing on the right pitch and support for a voice's intensity without damaging the vocal apparatus, is of good use for a singer, but these techniques do not necessarily guide them to an individual belt sound.

Since the singing voice as a musical instrument only exists through the coherent movements of many muscles, the long tradition of using metaphors in voice teaching, exemplified by the methods of Paul Lohmann and Franziska Martienssen-Lohmann, appears to be a useful pedagogy to teach belting. However, I went further, explaining that to sing loud and in tune, a belt voice needs as much voice support and accurate voice placement as a classically-trained voice, but only a *modified Bel canto technique* that avoids the sound of typical classical tone production is useful. Exercises of *Bel canto* technique need to be adapted to teach and learn the maintenance of a neutral position of the soft palate in favor of good diction with a natural voice placement while avoiding especially round and broad vowels. A belt voice needs a natural voice placement for *singing* combined with diction typically for speaking. Concerning support, a singer can reach the intensity of a belt voice by using a compressed air stream, but without pushing against the larynx; this allows the singer to avoid the typical vibrato of a classically-trained voice.

The results of examining the belt sound, discussing conclusions of voice research, and analyzing the possibilities of a modified *Bel canto* technique as a teaching method for belting, brought me back to the vocal beauty of a belt voice. Supported by Richard Miller's³⁵ argument that it is possible to find the right way to do anything with a voice, I referred to different ideals of vocal beauty compared to the elite vocalism of classical singing. As shown in chapter 2.3.4, vocal aesthetics is a musical matter and sound is a question of taste, emotional reception, and perception based on musical knowledge and experience listening to a certain singing style. Contrary to classical singing, belting is never singing *en soi*, to use the expression of Roland Barthes.³⁶ I argued that belting, as a singing style and as a vocal technique, serves the interpretation of a character in an authentic performance in front of the respective audience. Such an authentic performance can only be reached through an emotional quality of the singing voice that connects the voice and the listener. Only then can the sound of a belt voice have what Barthes calls *the grain of the voice*,³⁷ a quality that cannot be defined scientifically, learned, or taught.

Even though, as the departure point of my dissertation, chapter 2 concentrated mainly on the belt voice as a musical instrument, my research and arguments guided me to the conclusion that belting is not a question of reaching a vocal quality comparable to elite vocalism, especially not in Broadway musical theatre: Belting is the *language* of the Broadway musical in which a Broadway Belt raises her voice. As a figurehead of America's musical theatre culture, she has on stage and off a crucial impact on American society, especially when it comes to ongoing discussions about feminism and race. The Broadway Belt has a sociological significance beyond Broadway musical theatre.

In conclusion, it would seem legitimate to define the Broadway Belt as an iconic female Broadway musical performer, a diva on stage and off, who has charisma (Viagas), or what Mark Robinson³⁸ calls the *Je ne sais quoi*, and who possesses a belt voice containing *the grain of the voice*.

³⁵ Richard Miller cit. in Sataloff, *Treatment of Voice Disorders*. 80.

³⁶ Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice – Interviews 1962–1980*. 183.

³⁷ Ibid. 184.

³⁸ Robinson, "The 7 Qualities That Define a Broadway Diva".

(Barthes). She is a strong, independent woman with feminist principles who achieved stardom through her talent and skills, appearing in star vehicles with mostly “feminist” characters that usually correspond to her actor’s personage at its best. Her impact on Broadway musical theatre over the last hundred years, in parallel to the ongoing fight for feminism and racial equality, confirms how crucial Broadway musical theatre is as the voice of American culture and society. Advocating for diversity of representation in the theatre and taking part in advancing equal rights in American society in *all* genders, ethnicities, and cultures, the Broadway Belt is a crucial pillar of Broadway musical theatre and needs to be acknowledged as such in order to understand the Broadway musical’s past, to improve its present, and to ensure its future.

This dissertation aims to contribute to multiple academic disciplines and discourses. For example, my findings on the relevance of the Broadway Belt in Broadway musical theatre as historically paralleling the progression of feminism are of interest for American culture studies. Researchers investigating the relationship of cultural practices to social phenomena in the context of their political dynamics could find interest in taking my results as an example and looking deeper into the influence that exercised feminism has on other cultural disciplines. They might expand the subject of Broadway musical theatre and the Broadway Belt as its icon into culture studies of art, film/video, or the media, for example, through a comparative study of female movie stars created by Hollywood’s entertainment industry. The growing development of discussions in the media about feminism, gender, and racial injustice in social and political contexts demonstrate the necessity to question American society and its primarily white leadership. My discussion of the Broadway Belt as the icon of America’s most important art form, part of the country’s cultural identity, sheds a light on the possibilities for Broadway musical theatre to revolutionize society from the inside: The Broadway Belt, sending a feminist and anti-racist message for a hundred years, over and over again, against all odds, is a hallmark of American musical theatre, one that should be understood as exemplary when examining other genres and their potential as agents of social change.

However, the possible applications of my work are not limited exclusively to American culture studies. The exploration of intersectionality

of gender and racism and, beyond this, genderqueerness and a multi-racial society, concerns gender studies as much as studies about ethnic equality and sociology. In these fields, the results of my research could contribute to discussions about music or another cultural discipline as a driving force in the fight for acceptance of any gender and ethnicity in the respective cultural domain, as well as in society itself, and to considerations of at what point idolized stars and divas do, or do not, support the cause of equal rights.

Looking back to the departure point of my research, the results of my analysis of the belt sound also involve voice research and voice pedagogy. My results relating to the origins of belting as a vocal expression set to music are crucial for historical musicology. Studies of historical musicology concentrate on Western classical tradition and still are quite uncommunicative when it comes to popular music. Thus, my findings of belters using the basics of classical vocal technique and producing the singer's formant (like classically-trained singers) connect the disciplines of classical and popular music. As said, Broadway musical theatre took part in forming American cultural identity and my dissertation demonstrates at which point Broadway musical theatre can establish ties and help to reduce the disciplinary dilemma between the usual classifications of classical and popular music.

For studies in voice pedagogy, my dissertation takes a clear position that belting and *Bel canto* do not exclude one another. My goal always was and remains to advocate for a proper vocal technique for belting that is neither completely based on classical vocal technique, nor discounts recognized teaching methods for good voice hygiene. My findings are destined to connect the knowledge and experience of classical voice teachers to the *grain* of a belt voice, opening up a new understanding of belting as being *in no way* connected to screaming or yelling.

Since I have written this dissertation as a subject of theatre studies, further research in this discipline can profit from my results to take an additional analysis of the relationship of the actor's personage and the speaking voice, the direct consequences of this relationship for star theatre, and the relative importance of divas versus realism in theatre (or in multimedia/technical shows), as well as to shed a light on racism in theatre, on- and offstage. Additionally, when it comes to musicality

in theatre, my findings on the belt voice could also participate in a discussion about the changing landscape in dramatic theatre: As much as belting revolutionized Broadway musical theatre, an elite belt voice could transform a *play with music* towards the genre of musical theatre, creating a closer connection between the disciplines *musical* and *drama*.

Even though the subject of this dissertation concerns the Broadway Belt in the Broadway musical as a subgenre of *American* theatre, my results can contribute to research concentrating on European or German musical culture and gender studies, for example, to analyses of the exchange between British musical theatre and American musical theatre. Originally a cultural “one-way street” from the United Kingdom to the United States, the then-new subgenre Broadway musical theatre turned the tables on London’s West End and conquered its theaters – until, launched in the 1970s by Andrew Lloyd Webber, a new British invasion arrived on Broadway. Research about feminism and racism in original West End musical theatre, as well as the cultural influence that Broadway musical theatre has had here (and, possibly, on feminist movements in the U.K. in general), could be rich subjects for future academic work. Concerning German-language musical theatre, the so-called musical boom in Germany and Austria in the 1980s needs particular attention. Star-making characters, diva roles, and the actor’s personages of the respective female performers of musicals like *Elisabeth*, *Mozart!*, *Rebecca*, and *Marie Antoinette* – all created by the creative team of composer Sylvester Levay and playwright Michael Kunze – still need to be examined concerning their impact on feminism in Germany and Austria. Additionally, discussions about the intersectionality of gender and ethnicity in European theatre and within different European social structures, are crucial for a necessary, continuing discourse against xenophobia and sexual harassment.

Finally, my conclusions could be exemplary for new perspectives in future academic research; for example, analyzing the status and relevance of female and multiracial managers in the U.S. economy or examining the impact of female or multiracial members of Congress in the advancement of equal rights. Additionally, intersectionality of gender and racism in Broadway musical theatre offers a departure point for multiple discussions about diversity and genderqueerness in

other theatre forms, possible new gender- or ethnicity-swapped interpretations of classical oeuvres, and the aim of increasing multiracial theatre in general.

My dissertation builds bridges between multiple disciplines. Examining the Broadway Belt through an exclusively musical lens would be a small fragment of the story due to her influential position in American culture and society. The strength of my work is that it has not only highlighted the form of expression, reception, and perception of Broadway belting as a crucial element of Broadway musical theatre; it has also established the Broadway Belt, the female musical performer exercising belting as a singing style, as a figurehead of the genre *and* an advocate for feminism and the fight against racism in American society.

History proves that every movement towards cultural, social, and political progress needs *a voice to be raised*, and such a voice needs to be strong, loud, and unconventional, as is the voice of the Broadway Belt. In culture, as in politics and economics, there are more unorthodox figures behind the Broadway Belt to explore as ambassadors for equal rights in a multiracial and gender-diverse society. *Raising the voice* for these values of humanity and compassion is crucial to keep the discussions alive and to ensure a brighter future for gender, ethnicity, and the social order.

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This dissertation presents an analysis of the musical belt voice, especially the belt sound and its necessary vocal technique, and examines the unique actor's personage of the elite female Broadway musical performer.

Discourses about the status of the Broadway Belt as "star" and "diva," as well as her public reception, strongly suggest a feminist perspective. Through belting out in feminist roles on stage and speaking out on related issues offstage, she contradicts gender preconceptions.

A focused discussion on African-American belters and their roles sheds light on the intersectionality of racism and anti-feminism in Broadway musical theatre.

Finally, the study presents a musical analysis of "Rose's Turn" in *Gypsy* alongside a case study of the character Rose, one of the most influential roles for a Broadway Belt.

This monograph advocates the creation of new musicals as star vehicles for Broadway belters – of any ethnicity and gender – as indispensable to guide Broadway musical theatre into its platinum age.

Christin Bonin accomplished her PhD in Theatre Studies in 2020, following an MA in Musicology. She has appeared on stage at the Bavarian State Opera and, as a certified voice teacher, published her "Belt Voice Training" method. Bonin continues to write books and sing jazz, pop, and musical theatre.

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