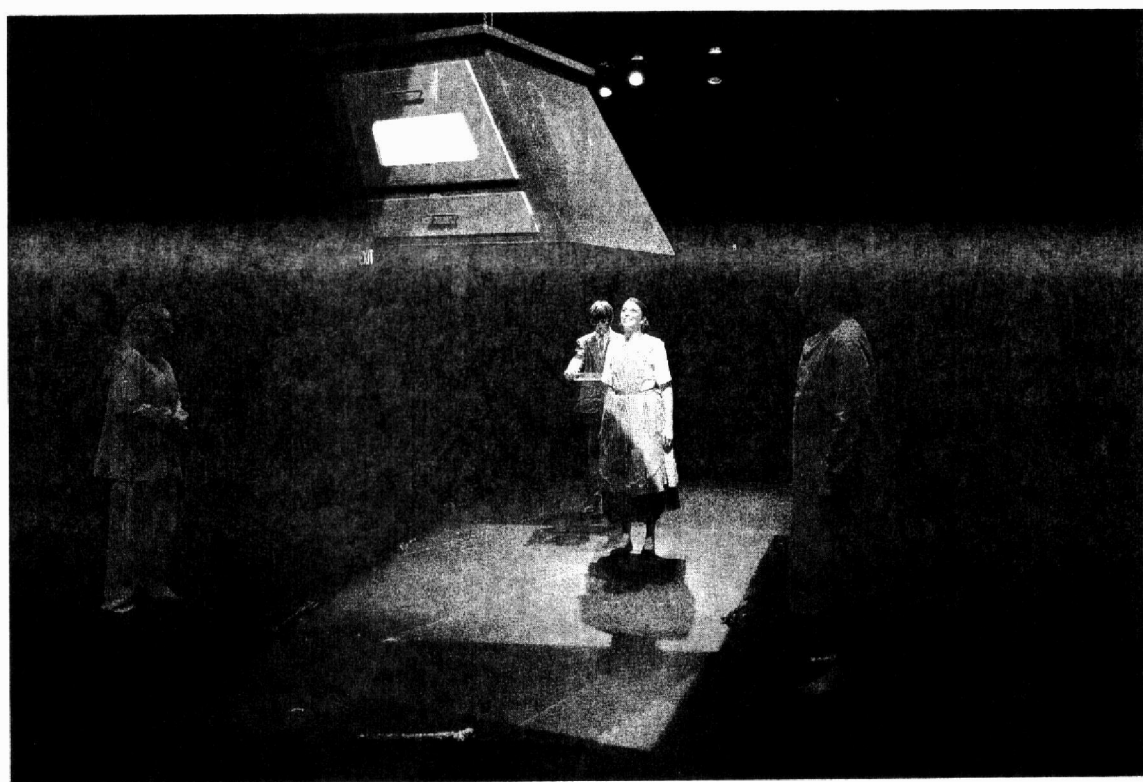


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Tradition or Travesty? Radical Reinterpretations of the Musical Theatre Canon

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Imagine a production of *Annie* where the eponymous curly-headed orphan's road to riches is only a dream. Or a post-9/11 *The Sound of Music* set on rubble. How about *South Pacific* set in a mental ward for victims of the Grenada conflict? These actual reinterpretations of canonical musicals seem radical, shocking, even funny, while directorial reinterpretations of classic nonmusical works are generally accepted, and often acclaimed. Musical productions, particularly of beloved romantic or comedic classics, that depart from the established replicable norm often clash with authors and licensing agencies. When they escape legal action, critics, audience members, or the theatre community frequently label the productions or artists involved as transgressive. This essay examines several such musical reconsiderations through in-depth discussions with their directors, and examines the legal, historical, and commercial reasons why musicals, particularly canonized works, are often produced virtually identically. These issues are vital to explore, given their implications for the future of musical theatre production.

Legalities and Licensing

A brief look at the legal questions surrounding musical productions serves to contextualize our subsequent case studies. When a director or company decides to mount a production outside the public domain, they will sign a contract with one of the major licensing agencies—Rodgers and Hammerstein Organization (R&H); Music Theatre International (MTI); Tams-Witmark; Samuel French—including terms such as: “Licensee agrees to perform the play in accordance with the material furnished by the Licensor and agrees to make no additions, transpositions, or interpolations of any kind in, and no substantial deletions from, the music score or book” (Tams-Witmark License Agreement).

Anyone who has ever been involved in any capacity of a musical production will know that these laws are continually broken. Illegal actions include changing orchestration, altering lines, switching the sex of a character, or cutting out minor characters altogether. Nonetheless, these choices are made every day by artists working at wide-ranging venues, from community theatres to Broadway. The official, legal course of action is to contact the rights-holders and ask permission, and in fact several kinds of changes have already been pre-approved by the authors. Drew Cohen, president of MTI, in an interview for this essay, says that theatres contact his company every day to approve small changes, which sometimes are allowed, when there are (in his words) “good reasons” (Cohen interview). But as these words indicate, the gray areas are confusing and dangerous. For example, to what extent do printed stage directions need to be followed? Bert Fink, senior vice president of communications for R&H, explains that artists must “honor the spirit and integrity of copyrighted work, [or] stay in the spirit of what the authors intended” (Fink interview). Cohen puts it a different way: “we know [a violation] when we see it” (Cohen interview).

As these definitions are far from clear-cut, conflicts are bound to occur. Confusion exists over the nature of illegality, as well as questions of detection and punishment. In fact, most licensing agencies have explicit wording on their websites, warning against infractions. The fact that these laws are frequently broken does not make changes any less illegal. According to Kevin Scott, author of the 1999 article "Who Owns the Rights? Copyright, the Law and Licensing the Show," more companies, both amateur and professional, are caught and punished than the theatre community is aware of:

Most of these cases never come to court. A private, confidential settlement is made, to the advantage of the side that would almost certainly prevail if the case did come to court. No one not directly involved in the case ever hears about it, preserving the reputation of both the [theatre or school] and the publisher/licensing agency. (13)

While Cohen notes that cases rarely come to court, he says that MTI can use the specter of a lawsuit as a means to educate. For instance, he recalls a college production of *West Side Story* that cut much of the music, calling it "repetitive and superfluous" (Cohen interview). MTI required the department to send an apology letter to the rights-holders and add a yearly seminar on copyright to their program.

Licensing agencies profess to be open to certain changes if they are first asked permission. A typical clause reads: "If you need to make any alterations, please put your request in writing detailing the changes or cuts you would like to make and we will be happy to see if we can obtain the author's permission you require" (see <www.rnh.com/theatre/tlnews>). Fink is aware of the fierce reputation R&H has for safeguarding their shows, and remarks that "we don't mind that, but we [also] respect the process and like to think that we are creative partners too" (Fink interview). He argues that R&H does not "mandate color-by-numbers musicals" (Fink interview), assuring that R&H always tries to use dialogue before pursuing punitive measures. Cohen agrees that his company, MTI, "tries to be reasonable" (Cohen interview), but notes that some rights-holders are far more willing to accept changes than others.

Productions at regional theatres, major commercial productions, and smaller amateur or school productions all have very different repercussions. Whereas larger commercial tours or Broadway revivals by necessity do not open unless they have cleared all changes with the rights-holders, and while school or community productions often pass unnoticed, professional regional productions offer a dangerous mix of conditions. Up-and-coming professional directors attempt adventurous productions in regional theatres, perhaps hoping to fly under the radar. Not coincidentally, both the productions at the center of this essay were developed in mid-sized and well-thought-of regional theatres. Whereas larger commercial productions hold higher stakes for the authors and therefore are subject to tighter enforcement, regional theatres, with shorter runs and a limited audience, will not by their nature cause a significant impact on how audiences perceive the work in the long run.

Cohen and Fink agree that venue has much to do with whether or not rights-holders grant permission for "radical" productions. Cohen points out that a high-profile theatre like Trinity Repertory Company in Providence, Rhode Island, brings more focused attention and scrutiny. Thus rights-holders are more likely to find out about changes, and are more likely to worry about their impact. At the same time, higher-profile artists are more likely to receive permission for daring choices. Cohen points out that MTI's decisions depend on the credibility of the person doing the requesting. For instance, when John Doyle, a director with an established reputation, asks to do a production of *Sweeney Todd* with actors playing the instruments, he is more likely to receive permission, versus when "any old person" (Cohen interview) asks to do the same thing.¹ Fink points out that R&H treats three categories of theatres—amateur, professional, and "first class"—differently, granting more leeway to first-class productions (Broadway, West End, or subsequent tours). While he says that R&H regrets the fact, he believes that those high-level productions can inspire artists and audiences around the world on the possibilities of the musicals.

Many directors not working on first-class productions assume that changes they would like to make will not be approved, thereby encouraging attempts to make alterations surreptitiously. The public only occasionally hears of the repercussions, but examples of directors' concepts being prosecuted are myriad. Chris Coleman's production of *Oklahoma!* at Actor's Express in Atlanta contained a framing device of a World War II-era acting company gathering around a radio to hear the news of Pearl Harbor and subsequently rehearsing the show. They also, according to Fink, added another backstage storyline, including dialogue.² The production was caught, given a warning letter, and forced to remove the conceptual framework (Hulbert). Director Scott Miller, of the New Line Theatre in St. Louis, petitioned Steven Sondheim to be allowed to make one of the couples in *Company* of the same sex and was denied. The Alice B. Theatre in Seattle ran a production of the same musical where several of the couples were gay; when the licensors found out they issued a cease-and-desist order, but finally allowed the theatre to finish the final few performances of its run (Miller). These are only a few examples of the kinds of conflicts that continually arise.

Reconceptualizations of spoken-word drama deserve their own investigation, but unfortunately are outside the scope of this essay. One should briefly note, however, that although these questions also occur in the world of "straight" drama, the most frequently produced classics of playwrights such as Shakespeare, Chekhov, and Ibsen are in the public domain. These classic plays therefore not only avoid legal difficulties, but they also seem to encourage more "radical" choices in production. The precedent of challenging reconceptualizations of these authors' works, particularly Shakespeare, has had time to be established. The vast majority of the musical theatre repertory—excepting only early operettas—remains under copyright, thereby allowing legal concerns as well as circumscribing production choices. As more and more musicals begin to emerge from copyright protection, radical productions will raise artistic questions rather than legal ones.

Radical Productions

Kevin Moriarty, the then-artistic director of the Hangar Theatre in Ithaca, New York, directed a production of *The Sound of Music* in June 2002. Moriarty's interpretation of this Rodgers and Hammerstein work could certainly be called a "radical reconceptualization." Moriarty utilized color-blind casting, including an African American Captain Von Trapp and multiracial children. He also changed the script: intercutting scenes, excising text, and adding material—including, most strikingly, a Nazi shooting the character Max Detweiler. However, these choices were not the most radical elements of the production; the design of the musical easily held that honor, for the entire production took place on a set consisting primarily of rubble. The principal elements of the abstract set were damaged pieces of buildings from a European city: a large, "once great" burned staircase, and a bombed church's massive stained-glass window. Real rubble from construction sites and soot covered the set. In the center of a raked platform, a large, gold picture-frame surrounded a painting of the Alps, punctured by the staircase.

How did this radical production come about? Moriarty describes listening to *The Sound of Music* a few days after 9/11 and thinking of the images of destruction in downtown Manhattan, "and I started thinking . . . about how you pick up and go on from there, and how you find hope. . . . And then I suddenly went, 'Oh my god, that's what Rodgers and Hammerstein were writing about!'" (Moriarty interview). He argues that although *The Sound of Music* serves as a "cleaned-up reference point" (Moriarty interview) for World War II, audiences in 1959 would have felt powerful resonances of the war in the musical. The post-9/11 climate paralleled that set of circumstances. Moriarty postulates that

If fifteen years from September 11 somebody made a Broadway musical that referenced that time period, the people who had lived through that time would read into it a level of destruction and atrocity and personal-ness. . . . And that big idea led to saying that's where the play needs

to take place, in an environment that the audience spends the whole show aware of the costs, aware of the dangers. (Moriarty interview)

Moriarty's production was illegal under current copyright law for several reasons, some more obvious than others. Although he made a choice not to change Rodgers's music, he altered the script extensively—a clear infringement. The conceptual nature of the production presents a more nebulous area of potential transgression, for although licensors' contracts do not explicitly address the issue of design, a set as radical as this one could be regarded as substantially altering authorial intent. Moriarty acknowledges these issues, but says that at the time he truly did not realize, naively perhaps, the impact these changes involved: "I really honestly believe that Richard Rodgers would love this production. . . . And so I thought, 'Oh how could this be disrespectful, this is nothing I wouldn't do for Shakespeare.' But of course you're not supposed to do for Rodgers and Hammerstein what you do for Shakespeare" (Moriarty interview).

Later, Moriarty realized that the Hangar Theatre had been placed in jeopardy, and that his production could not now be seen anywhere else, despite offers from other theatres. However, he still believes directors should rethink the classics and create them anew for contemporary audiences. With this canonized light and romantic musical, he felt this need particularly strongly. When friends expressed surprise that he would direct a show like *The Sound of Music*, "I kept saying, the show I grew up loving is not the show you have in your minds . . . and the only way to get them to . . . not experience the tenth generation of production which leads to camp was to force images and sometimes plot, that were so aggressively not [the traditional and expected]."

Moriarty argues that audiences come to a production of a canonized musical, particularly *The Sound of Music*, with its much-beloved film adaptation, with layers of cultural baggage. He states that

[n]one of these efforts would have been necessary if this was the first production, because people . . . just take the story as you tell it to them. But as the years go on, it gets all those layers of film over it, and that's the part that I think it's so hard for the copyright holders and the producers and the people who are the safeguards of the canon to understand, which is that if you really, really love these musicals, you presumably want the audience to have the same experience now, that they did on opening night. (Moriarty interview)

Moriarty's assumption that fresh audience perceptions of classic works are possible, let alone preferable, should be subject to debate. The "layers of film" that accumulate on these works become an indelible part of how they are received, *The Sound of Music* offering a perfect example. Audience members come to such a beloved piece with layers of association, of nostalgia, of a time in their own life when they first saw it either onstage or, more likely, onscreen. R&H, despite its usual insistence on staying true to the original stage texts, recognizes just this problem. It licenses "I Have Confidence" and "Something Good" from *The Sound of Music* film to be interpolated into the stage productions, recognizing that audiences do not forget the film when attending the live musical. The same applies to associations from other live productions. Can audiences put aside their memories and associations when watching a familiar piece? Forcing new perceptions by shocking audiences out of complacency may be a legitimate goal, but we should question whether an audience could ever experience a radical *The Sound of Music* as a new piece, rather than a violated old one. Wouldn't an audience in 2002, in order to have the same experience on opening night as an audience in 1959, have to see an entirely new musical? In order to further explore these crucial concerns, we turn to a second radical production.

Amanda Dehnert, director and, at the time, an artistic associate of Trinity Repertory Company, faced similar questions and very different consequences during her production of *Annie* in the spring of 2003. As with Moriarty, she was responding to the generally dismissive attitude of theatre profes-

sionals and even audiences toward the musical she was assigned to direct. Dehnert explains: "*Annie* has picked up a reputation, as a lot of popular musicals have, and *Annie* possibly more so, as being very, very fluffy. But it wasn't actually" (Dehnert interview). Although small textual changes were cleared through the musical's authors, Dehnert and Trinity Rep did not mention the production's framing device. The concept began with a prologue where Annie appears in an abandoned theatre, having run away from her orphanage. The beginning of the musical was presented as a memory through Annie's eyes, which then transitioned into her dream of being saved by Grace Farrell and adopted by Daddy Warbucks. However, Annie's dream did not last. At the climax of the dream, she woke up again in the theatre, but strengthened by her dream sang a reprise of "Tomorrow." Annie then found Sandy outside the theatre, and they left to have new adventures together. Dehnert felt the need for this device because "the piece seemed to propose that the solution to all problems was basically to win the lottery . . . , and that money fixes everything. And I actually didn't think that that was what the bulk of *Annie* was trying to do" (Dehnert interview).

Dehnert's vision was seen at three previews in its entirety, until a friend of Martin Charnin, *Annie*'s librettist, saw the production and alerted the author to the presence of the dream framing device. Although, according to Dehnert, the show's other authors, Thomas Meehan and Charles Strouse, were supportive of the production, Charnin, the central author involved in this episode, immediately issued a complaint to MTI. Meetings were held between Charnin and Drew Cohen, on one side, and Dehnert and Oskar Eustis, Trinity Rep's artistic director at the time, on the other. The end result was an order to remove the concept. Dehnert had a very strong reaction to this encounter: "[The removal of the concept] is tantamount to [Charnin] really getting to be God, and saying, 'No, you can't think the thoughts you want to think.' You know, I don't want to put it quite up on the level of censorship, but . . . when it was happening it felt like censorship" (Dehnert interview). Certain changes were allowed to remain in the production; however, the concept and framing device were the crux of Dehnert's vision and Charnin's disapproval.

What was illegal about this concept? The potential illegality comes down to the contractual paragraph included in the show's license. MTI's statement reads: "There shall be no alterations, interpolations or emendations to the printed material without express consent of the authors. To do so is copyright infringement and a violation of the license agreement" (see <MTIshows.com>). The real issue in the case of Dehnert's production was whether the framing device counted as an interpolation. Although no spoken text was added in the framing device, the way it was placed could lead audience members to believe that the dream concept was part of the original libretto. Dehnert explains that "[Charnin's] objection was that anyone should think that this is what [the authors] actually intended. And that that would irreparably damage the material. Because it was a bad idea" (Dehnert interview).

Cohen points out that Trinity Rep was used to adapting or reconsidering works in the public domain, including extensive Shakespeare conceptualizations. Charnin reportedly remarked: "While I'm flattered to be compared to Shakespeare, I'm still alive" (Cohen interview). Cohen also notes that the authors of *Annie*, during the creation process, had considered interpolating a dream sequence into the production themselves, but had rejected the idea because they felt it made no logical sense.³ Cohen points out that the darker tonality of the production, which was more attuned to the Great Depression, could have been utilized with no illegalities, but that the sheer extent of the changes entered the realm of copyright violation.

Audience Expectations and Profit

After the incident, Dehnert was left with very strong opinions on the subject. As she argues,

I still think that the theatre is a living art, it will only survive as a living art, and that as an author you have to understand that once your work is out there—it's out there. And you don't . . . get

to be the keeper of the flame. [If you want it to be] permanent and never changing, then you're working in the wrong field. (Dehnert interview)

If we accept, as Dehnert argues, that the ephemeral nature of theatre should allow unrestricted artistic freedom, what then stands in the artist's way? Authors or rights-holders fear adverse audience reaction, and believe that audiences will rebel against productions that diverge from their expectations or preconceptions. As Cohen points out, these shows are brands, and MTI and other rights-holders want to ensure that a radical production doesn't hurt their brand. He argues that the question comes down to risk: "Top-10 shows like *Annie* and *The Sound of Music*—these are the artists' lifeblood, and something out there that can reflect negatively on the piece itself puts their own livelihood into jeopardy" (Cohen interview). Fink concurs: "The risk is if the production is not well done it would turn off others, and the show would have to recover" (Fink interview).

These arguments essentially come down to shows' profit margins. Moriarty points out the negative repercussions of the current level of rigidity: "It's ultimately a commercial decision on the [licensors'] part, which is what makes it so odd, is that they're worried this will . . . ruin the viability of *Annie* forever or *The Sound of Music* forever, and bizarrely enough it feels like this is what they desperately need" (Moriarty interview). We cannot forget that musical theatre has been, for its relatively short history, a commercial endeavor. This holds true on Broadway and in both regional and community theatres. On Broadway, the stakes are high. Reproducibility adds to the profit margin of musical theatre, so that identical productions of, say, staged Disney films can cross the world with an identified, quality-assured product. Rights-holders do not want to damage their brands, and thus expect a certain level of reproducibility in productions of *Annie* or *The Sound of Music* across the globe. Even if these productions are not carbon copies, such as with the Disney spectacles, in rights-holders' view, productions should hold closely enough to the original product to keep audiences happy.

Audience expectations are valued because they hold the key to profits. Individual production profits are not at stake, but rather the damage to the brand at large. Fink points out that "theatre has an unspoken contract with its audience; if a theatre promises Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!*, they had better deliver that. Don't call it that if it's distorted beyond recognition" (Fink interview). Cohen points out that Trinity Rep was not promoting Dehnert's *Annie* any differently than a traditional production: the poster featured the requisite red wig, for example. Audiences coming to this production had no advance warning and were therefore primed for angry disappointment when they did not find the *Annie* of their expectations.

Surprisingly, however, at least according to their directors—an admittedly biased source—audience reactions to these particular radical productions were welcoming, rather than angry or shocked. Moriarty reports that there were few complaints leveled at his production of *The Sound of Music*: "Shockingly enough, [we received] many fewer [complaints] than we would get on any normal production that we had radically reconceived. So less than for, say, a conceptualized Shakespeare play" (Moriarty interview). He did, however, in the marketing of the production, discourage the audience from bringing small children, much to the confusion of those familiar with *The Sound of Music*. The concept was not discussed in the advertising, except to say that this was *not* the much-beloved film. Moriarty says that "[i]t's amazing how generous audiences are about [changes], if they think you're trying to tell the story the right way" (Moriarty interview).⁴ Dehnert agrees that audience reaction was not what the rights-holders might expect and has developed very strong opinions in the aftermath of the events surrounding her production:

I think there are two different sorts of audiences. I think the people . . . who want their theatre to be nostalgia . . . shouldn't go to the theatre. Because they're not going to get what they want. . . . Audiences that are interested in seeing a story taking a journey are completely interested in and defensive to [daring or radical] work. (Dehnert interview)

What about audiences who crave traditional productions that they can enjoy for nostalgic purposes? According to Dehnert at least, even these audiences seemed to accept and enjoy her vision. Although she presented her fully realized conceptual production of *Annie* at only three previews, Dehnert paid close attention to audience reactions and felt that they were, in fact, in tune with (and not rebelling against) her framework:

When we got to the moment where it was clear that it was a dream, . . . it was really thrilling to hear people gasp. . . . And just to see people clearly get it and to be hanging with it and waiting to see what Annie would do next. . . . And the fact that . . . people were still clapping and cheering and getting to their feet, tells me that they weren't ready to storm the theatre and burn it down. (Dehnert interview)

Musicals versus Dramas

Why are musical reinterpretations potentially more shocking to audiences or rights-holders than nonmusical reinvestigations? Moriarty tells an anecdote about an SSDC (Society of Stage Directors and Choreographers) meeting where the issue of copyrighting directors' work was being debated, in response to the 1999 case involving Joe Mantello's direction of *Love! Valour! Compassion!*, which had been copied without rights at Caldwell Theatre Company in Boca Raton, Florida. The directors in the room were in agreement when it came to their work on nonmusical plays: they didn't want their blocking or conceptualizations to be utilized when they were not receiving compensation. Then one director brought up musicals, suggesting, as an example, that other productions should not be able to use Hal Prince's original staging for Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Evita*. A well-known director angrily argued the contrary, saying that "[i]f you're doing *Hello Dolly!* she has to wear that red dress!" (qtd. in Moriarty interview). Moriarty continues: "And it suddenly seems like there's this whole subset of directors—including community theatre directors, high school directors, and professional directors—who honestly can't imagine that productions don't always look alike and that you can't just copy it" (Moriarty interview).

Due to a reproducibility mindset trickling down from the highest levels, worries about legality, and/or merely due to a lack of imagination, copycat productions are the norm, and new visions of old musicals are the exception. Most damagingly, because of the stereotypical assumption that most musicals are artistically unchallenging or unsophisticated, the reasoning follows that they are unworthy of reinterpretation. Therefore copycat productions are expected and considered the right of directors to restage as well as audiences to re-enjoy. Dehnert, for one, agrees that the "fluff" question remains central, and laments this destructive label:

[Musicals] are actually generally not [fluff]. I mean if they've stood the test of time they've got really good structure, . . . and there's no reason why you shouldn't be able to approach them as legitimate classics. . . . So in a way the industry is only hurting itself. Because frankly . . . anything that is really good, can take it. (Dehnert interview)

Fink agrees, albeit from a different perspective: "True classics will live on and endure because of a good production, and will endure despite others" (Fink interview). He nonetheless maintains that the authors have the right to disagree with and thus disallow any concepts they feel are damaging.

Critics have hailed a few Broadway reinterpretations for their fresh or radical look at classics, but these productions have failed to dispel the fluff myth or create the kind of movement whereby new conceptualizations become the norm. We could argue that the general dismissal of the musical theatre form means that the occasional Broadway musical reconceptualization does not get taken seriously or demonstrate the potential of such new productions. In addition, *Cabaret* and the few other musicals that have been significantly reinterpreted in major Broadway or West End

productions—mostly the Sondheim oeuvre, with *Sweeney Todd*, *Company*, and *Pacific Overtures*—all fit into the small category of “serious” musicals, which largely avoid the fluff label. *The Sound of Music* and *Annie* have reputations as comic or romantic, light pieces, which are difficult to imagine as worthy of the kind of reconsiderations afforded to serious or intellectual musical works, let alone Shakespeare and other nonmusical canonic texts. Dehnert has a separate, more concrete idea as to why there is more resistance to reinterpretations of musicals: “Musicals . . . take so much time and energy to make, and by the time they’re made, they are huge chunks of people’s blood and guts” (Dehnert interview). The process of making musicals is highly collaborative, much more so than in straight theatre. Logistically, there are simply more people involved. Cohen mentions that when requests to make changes are denied by MTI, often the disapproval comes from only one of the authors involved; however, if just one party disagrees with the idea, MTI must refuse the request. Moriarty posits an additional theory. He hypothesizes that we have not yet found an artist or scholar who can popularize the idea of reinterpreting musicals, something Peter Brook, Peter Sellers, and other theorists have achieved in the nonmusical arena.

Director Anne Bogart provided one potential answer to Moriarty’s call for a theoretical and conceptual pioneer with her production of *South Pacific* at New York University in 1984. The production, performed by students, was set in a hospital for damaged young people from the Grenada conflict. Each patient was prescribed to play a certain role from *South Pacific* for his or her treatment. At any one time, multiple actors played particular roles. Within this framing device, the text was mostly left intact. In my interview with Anne Bogart, she explains why she chose the canonical text *South Pacific*: “I grew up in the Navy and my father was on an island in the South Pacific during the Second World War. So for my first attempt at a musical this was a no-brainer. Also, I love the music” (Bogart, personal communication). This was Bogart’s—who is known for experimental and avant-garde works—first musical theatre staging. Significantly, R&H permitted the production despite noticeably “radical choices”; rights-holders have shut down other productions for much milder choices. Bogart’s esteemed reputation no doubt had much to do with R&H’s flexibility, though certain conflicts with the licensing agents did occur: “We didn’t have any trouble getting the initial leasing agreement, but the Rodgers and Hammerstein establishment would not let us extend our run even though we were sold out every night with lines down the block” (ibid.).

Technically, the potential illegalities of the production were, in theory, more minimal. As Bogart states: “I didn’t write any other text for the play and the framing device was only used for design and casting choices plus dramaturgy. We didn’t change the order of anything, just the arrangements and the number of people playing each character” (ibid.). Audiences attending a production directed by Anne Bogart were likely a particular group primed for experimental work, not necessarily a typical audience for *South Pacific*. In fact, Bogart told me that “the audience was consistently and overwhelmingly ecstatic. It was probably the popular height of my career. Everyone seemed to love it and had no problem whatsoever with the conceptual framework” (ibid.).

So although this particular audience apparently adored Bogart’s production, in isolation her vision does not serve the purpose of altering the critical view of musical reinterpretations, nor has Bogart directed any additional musicals. Thus the perception continues that the form remains unworthy of serious attention by directors. Unspoken assumptions about the high/low or art/popular culture dichotomy are insidious here; the dismissal of popular art and, by extension, directors of that genre privileges artists like Bogart who focus on nonmusical, “high-art” works. Therefore only someone from outside the world of popular musicals can confer status to reconsiderations of its works.

Are musicals unworthy of reinterpretation? Should radical or challenging productions be discouraged or illegal? Many scholars, practitioners, and admirers of the form would argue “no.” But the answer to the predicament we find ourselves in now ultimately resides in the hands of the rights-holders, for they have the law on their side. Both Fink and Cohen argue that rights-holders want to work with artists, and that, as Fink puts it, “[a]t the end of the day, everyone wants the best

for the show" (Fink interview). But who defines what is "best for the show"—a phrase rife with shades of gray? Will the rigid enforcement of copyright result in musicals accumulating "the dust of time" (Dehnert interview)? Putting aside aesthetic or qualitative judgments on the reinterpretations discussed in this essay, the questions remain: Should directors be allowed more artistic freedom than they currently enjoy? What steps can be taken toward resolving these issues?⁵

Both Moriarty and Dehnert have, since these productions, continued their careers with challenging stagings of musicals. Moriarty's directorial debut in 2009 at the Dallas Theater Center, where he has just completed his first year as artistic director, was a reconceptualizing of *The Who's Tommy*. His experience with *The Sound of Music* has affected his artistic choices, however; he recently took care to seek permission from Charles Strouse and Lee Adams to commission an entirely new libretto for their musical, *It's a Bird . . . It's a Plane . . . It's Superman!*, to be produced in 2010. When asked how she will proceed after the tumultuous events of her *Annie* production, Dehnert, who has continued to amass directorial credits and now teaches at Northwestern University, replies: "To sum up, I'm going to try to keep doing what I do. . . . And I guess on probably some sick level hope that it gets called into question again. And that there is more of a platform to make a statement" (Dehnert interview).

Responding to her call, this essay endeavors to bring a highly debated issue from the outside theatre world into the academy. Further debate remains critical to this issue. This essay is neither a polemic nor a manifesto for either side, but instead a plea to both sides for further cooperation. Artists cannot make indiscriminate changes in a piece where authorial rights are still legally enforced, and rights-holders should not hold on too tightly to what they consider the sacred, or profit-generating, original intent. How can we reconcile the need for directorial freedom with the legal and artistic rights of rights-holders? One answer only is clear: refusing to address the issue will contribute to the ossification and dismissal of the complex musical theatre form.

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Notes

1. In fact, Sondheim was so interested in Doyle's idea that he offered to help and became intimately involved in Doyle's productions of *Sweeney Todd* (2005) and *Company* (2005).
2. According to Fink, the additional plot involved the actress playing Laurey having an affair with the actor playing Jud, in addition to her reaction to her brother's death at Pearl Harbor.
3. According to Cohen, the authors felt that it did not make sense for an orphan who had never been outside an orphanage to have the knowledge to dream about the current events included in *Annie*.
4. The generally progressive attitudes prevalent in the university town of Ithaca, New York, where the Hangar Theatre is located, possibly had an impact on the kind of reception the production received.
5. Dehnert argues one potential solution: "If anything, maybe we just need the clause that says, 'the views expressed in this production are not those of the author'" (Dehnert interview).

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