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In: Student Journal of the Department of Anglophone Studies / Volume 1 (2018)

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17185/duepublico/47607>

URN: <urn:nbn:de:hbz:464-20181123-144417-5>

Link: <https://duepublico.uni-duisburg-essen.de:443/servlets/DocumentServlet?id=47607>

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Source: This essay is a shortened version of Malte Hansen's BA thesis which was supervised by Dr Melissa Knox-Raab. Published in Student Journal of the Department of Anglophone Studies (Vol. 1, 2018)

The Reception of the American Musical in Germany

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The musical as we know it today is widely considered a truly American art form. Despite musicals having taken off across the globe “there has always been [...] the sense that the ‘real thing’ takes place with [...] stars, flawless stage machinery, elaborate sets and costumes, professional musicians and dancers – and, of course, on Broadway” (Knapp 16). The term *Broadway* has thus become a synecdoche for U.S. American musicals, which emerged from New York City’s theater scene in the early twentieth century. Since then, the musical has become an essential part of the United States’ theater landscape and thus can be considered part of America’s national identity.²

But the growing international popularity of musicals raises the question of what makes the musical appeal to American and foreign audiences alike. Especially in Europe, the American musical has gained remarkable popularity despite the former dominance of operettas and other Europe-based forms of popular musical theater. Today, we can observe two major European musical hubs, with the more prominent one being London’s West. The other one might come as a surprise to some: Hamburg is often said to be “the musical theatre capital of Europe [outside of the UK]” (Martland, “Big in Europe” 16) and Germany being the biggest musical theater market in Europe (see 16). The triumph of the musical in Germany began with the first German-language replica productions of so-called ‘mega musicals’ in Hamburg in the 1980s, whose success led to a musical boom in the 1980s and 1990s (see “Alles für die Cats?”). Today, replica- and non-replica productions of American

1 This essay is a shortened version of Malte Hansen’s BA thesis which was supervised by Dr Melissa Knox-Raab.

2 In his book *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (2006), Raymond Knapp portrays the American musical as a “distinctively American and widely influential art form” (3) which “represent[s] a large slice of our national life and heritage” (10). Thus, Knapp does not only see the musical as an American genre because of its geographical origin, but because, according to him, national identity and the general zeitgeist are reflected and negotiated within the cultural arena, which is the American musical (see 10).

musicals make up the biggest part of all musical productions in Germany, while only few German musicals are being shown (see Kräft). Apart from the question of what makes the American musical appeal to Americans and Europeans alike, this popularity also raises the question if or in what ways the American musical is received differently outside of the U.S.

While the bulk of German critics and scholars say that the American musical is generally weak in content and relies on stage magic, I believe that these opinions mainly exist because both groups traditionally have bearish attitudes towards U.S. cultural influences, hold Eurocentric biases regarding cultural identity, and, most strikingly, have only limited musical exposure which accumulate to predefined notions about the genre.

WHAT MAKES A MUSICAL (NOT) AMERICAN?

Considering that the musical emerged in the United States and that the musical theater scene is still most vivid on and around Broadway, one might wonder if not every musical is essentially an American musical. However, scholars are sometimes discussing musicals in general and are sometimes referring to the American musical, which suggests that while the genre has been established internationally, some musicals still appear to be more American than others. Raymond Knapp argues that musicals have always been “projecting a mainstream sense of ‘America’ – of what America was, what it was not, and what it might become” (8). Hence, he seems to define a musical as American if it reflects and discusses notions of America and key themes of American culture.³ However, his work mostly aims at examining the Americanness of musicals without ever defining the musical as a genre, which is not – and arguably cannot be – exclusively American. I would like to argue that while a reflection of American themes and issues is central to American musicals, a show is mostly definable as American due to its perspective. By that I mean that a musical does not necessarily need to be concerned with notions of America, but it

3 In *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity*, Knapp discusses how musicals are “defining America” (101) by taking a look at the question of who ‘owns’ America (see 103), at “American mythologies” (119), and at “counter mythologies” (153) as well as by examining how musicals are “managing America’s others” (179) by taking a look at issues like “race and ethnicity” (181), “the Second World War” (228) and “Exoticism” (249).

must be targeted at American audiences, i.e., it must engage with their perspective to be definable as an American musical. The following examples of *Ich War Noch Niemals in New York* as a German musical which is partly concerned with notions of America, and *Hamilton*, which I consider to be American in its perspective, themes, and artistic influences, shall further support this claim.

The musical *Ich war noch niemals in New York* (2007) (“I have never been to New York”) premiered in Hamburg, Germany, and is a jukebox musical revisiting the songs of German singer-songwriter Udo Jürgens. The show was developed by a creative team of Europeans mostly on behalf of production company Stage Entertainment Germany. All of this suggests that the musical is influenced by European artistic notions and that it was conceived specifically for the German-speaking market, which is, however, still no guarantee for a non-American perspective. But the fact that the show is indeed narrated from a German (or European) point of view is apparent from its title, which implies that the show is partly concerned with notions of America (“New York”) but discusses them from an outsider’s perspective (“I have never been to”). A show like *Ich war noch Niemals in New York* may still be transferred to America at some point but it will surely be received differently as

American audiences will be acutely aware of anything that challenges their notions of what or who America is [...]. If Americans see representatives of other lands and cultures on the musical stage, they will see them in relation to some sense of who *they* are as Americans. (Knapp 103)

One might want to add that if Americans see representatives of their country and culture on the musical stage, they will see them in relation to their perception of the United States.

A musical that does not challenge Americans’ notions of their culture from the outside while heavily drawing on American culture is *Hamilton – An American Musical* (2015) by Lin-Manuel Miranda. This musical tells the story of founding father Alexander Hamilton through rap and hip-hop music. Most of the roles are cast with actors of color while only the role of King George III is consistently cast with white actors, making him the lovable villain against which a diverse America

must unite.⁴ *Hamilton*, thus, aims at creating an inclusive American identity by telling an inherently American story with a multi-ethnic cast through contemporary urban music and dance. The show's subtitle could accordingly not only hint at the heavy use of American historical and cultural references, and the influence of contemporary American artistic styles in music and dance, but also at the show's narrative perspective, i.e., its understanding of America as a diverse nation that is united by its historic and cultural legacy.

In conclusion, any musical originally conceived for the American market is an American musical because it assumes an American audiences' perspective. However, audiences' concepts of America and American culture are understandably diverse. That is why American musicals must be palatable to mainstream America – especially as they depend on commercial success. *Hamilton* cleverly ensures its ability to cater to different American tastes by making diversity one of its key themes.

GERMANY'S THEATER LANDSCAPE AND THE AMERICAN MUSICAL

Today, musicals are an integral part of Germany's theater landscape. But that has not always been that way. While the first production of a musical in Germany already took place in 1955 (see Siedhoff 58), it is widely argued that the musical continued to live in the shadows until the boom of the mega musical in the late 1980s popularized the genre immensely (see "Alles für die Cats?"). But even though the musical has become a popular art form in Germany, Germans seem to have completely different ideas and expectations of the genre than Americans do, which supposedly led to the failure of many Broadway shows in Germany, as Nils Grosch explains in an episode of the radio's show *Musikszene* discussing Germany's musical theater landscape after the big boom (see "Alles für die Cats?"). Grosch claims that German audiences usually expected "more entertainment, [and] less demanding literature" ("Alles für die Cats?", my translations) than audiences on Broadway. The many factors that lead to this discrepancy and its consequences shall be examined in the following.

4 The depiction of King George III in *Hamilton* also continues the long-established "tradition of treating England comically, albeit with great affection, in American musicals" (Knapp 2012, 45).

Had it not been for the Third Reich and its suppression of so-called “degenerate art,” musicals might have evolved about the same in Germany as they did in the United States (see Siedhoff 55). Regarding this tragedy, Nils Grosch remarks that before World War II, a couple of Berlin theaters like the *Großes Schauspielhaus* and the *Admiralspalast* were putting on Broadway-sized shows already (see “Alles für die Cats?”), which would qualify as musicals according to today’s standards. Some of these theaters survived the war or were refurbished sufficiently, but the former long-running shows were soon replaced by regularly changing productions of the publicly subsidized *Mehrsparten-Theater* (multi-genre theaters) that moved into those buildings. Due to this development, there has been a lack of adequate theaters in which extravagant, long-running musicals could have been performed (see “Alles für die Cats?”).

It was not until 1955, when the first production of an American musical came to Germany: *Kiss Me Kate* premiered in a German-language version and with a new choreography and production design in one of Frankfurt’s public theaters (see Siedhoff 58). Another milestone in the history of the American musical in Germany was the 1961 production of *My Fair Lady*, which was the first German-language reproduction of an original American musical (see 58).

The 1986 production of *Cats* in Hamburg then marks the beginning of a new era in the history of musicals in Germany. This production was a German-language replica of the original West End production and unexpectedly became the longest-running musical in the history of German musical theater up to that point (see “Alles für die Cats?”). *Cats* played in the publicly subsidized *Operettenhaus* but was produced by Friedrich Kurz, who – supported by private investors – produced *Cats* in Hamburg (see “Cats’-Premiere”). The show exceeded all expectations with a fifteen-year run, by the end of which it had long become one of Hamburg’s top tourist attractions (see “Cats’-Premiere”). Meanwhile, *Stella* and other production companies kept importing musicals from the West End and from Broadway. But because most of the available theaters at that time were still administered by public offices and/or did not have the technical infrastructure to mount a Broadway-sized production, new high-end musical theater buildings were constructed across the country, while Hamburg remained Germany’s undisputed musical capitol (see ‘Cats’-Premiere”).

In its December issue of 2017, the German journal *Musicals* listed over 250 musical productions in Germany – most of them being German-language version of

American musicals – shown in public theaters. However, the number of privately funded productions and theaters appears to have risen compared to earlier decades. But regardless of who produces musicals in Germany, it seems fair to say that the American musical has become an integral part of Germany's theater landscape.

Yet, the audience reception of the American musical in Germany is still rather unfavorable. This is partly because many of the above mentioned 250 productions are local amateur productions and because much of the more demanding musicals are only shown at publicly subsidized theaters where they also do not reach mainstream audiences as Grosch notes:

In Germany, we have two completely separated theater scenes: the private and the public scene. This shows especially drastically with musicals; we have a musical culture that is happening in theaters showing musicals only – and then we have the musical [...] as a regular feature of “normal” municipal multi-genre theaters. That is why there is a huge gap [...] between those two musical cultures that we have in Germany. (“Alles für die Cats?”, my translation)

Since musical productions in public theaters usually do not use the original costumes, choreography, set design, etc., audience tend to experience a German interpretation of an American piece of musical theater rather than the original American production. This means that the public only has access to a minimum of original productions, namely the extravagant privately funded productions of blockbuster musicals, which leads to a vicious circle: As most Germans only have experienced little exposure to demanding musical theater, they have a narrow understanding of the genre and according expectations. This tempts German producers to only finance and develop musicals that meet these expectations, which in turn reinforce the limited view that German audiences have of the genre.

An example of a production that continues to be immensely successful in America but that flopped in Germany is Jonathan Larson's rock musical *Rent*, which premiered off-Broadway in 1996. *Rent* is based on Giacomo Puccini's opera *La Bohème* and is set in New York City's East Village during the 1990s, where a group of artists struggles with poverty and personal losses during the AIDS crisis. The musical turned out to be a box office hit and won four *Tony Awards*, six *Drama Desk Awards* and the *Pulitzer Prize* for best drama. Only three years after its American premiere, *Rent* transferred to Düsseldorf as a German-language replica of the original production. But the show flopped, which soon forced the production

company to go into insolvency because they could not redeem the millions invested in the production (see “Alles für die Cats?”). Theater studies scholar Wolfgang Jansen presumes that German audiences could not connect with the characters’ struggles and the issues presented and even remembers an elderly couple saying “Well, I did not really find this great, nothing moved” (see “Alles für die Cats?”). His assessment supports Grosch’s claim that German audiences expect plain entertainment and not demanding content from a musical (see “Alles für die Cats?”). Therefore, according to Jansen, one of the reasons for the failure of *Rent* in Germany was that German audiences received the show distinctly different than American audiences because they could not relate to the plot, characters, and issues as much. Their expectations of the genre lead to disappointment and to disapproval of one of the most successful American musicals of all time.

THE MUSICAL IN OTHER MEDIA

As the musical is bound to the stage, it is rather difficult and expensive to make it available to many people at the same time. However, there are and have been many ways in which American musical theater content is distributed and popularized apart from the theater.

For many decades, show tunes have often become popular among more people than those who have seen the original show; such songs include “I Could Have Danced All Night” from *My Fair Lady* (1956) or “Memory” from *Cats* (1980). Even as early as during the “era known as Tin Pan Alley [ca. 1900 – 1930], popular song in the United States was dominated by New York City and by the musical stage” (Knapp 70). This trend has been revived in recent decades as ‘popified’ versions of show tunes have become popular again, e.g. in “Hard Knock Live” by Jay Z (1998) using samples from the musical *Annie* (1977), *The Hamilton Mix Tape* (2016) featuring covers of songs from the musical by renowned pop and hip-hop artists, or Sara Bareilles’ concept album *What’s Inside: Songs from Waitress* (2015) which laid the foundation for her musical *Waitress* (2015). In countries such as Germany in which often only the most popular songs acquire broader circulation and fame, audiences tend to have narrower ideas about the complexity and variety of music in the American musical

Besides music, movies helped popularize American musical theater around the world. Knapp argues that “since musicals have never before been shy about trying to achieve great effects from mechanical spectacle [...] they form a natural partnership with the film industry” (16), which is a valid point but also nourishes the perception of the American musical as gimmicky, extravagant spectacles while neglecting the cutting-edge musical theater that has often moved into the mainstream of America’s musical theater landscape. But regardless, movies have made it easier for distributors to promote American musicals in other countries. Germany has been a late bloomer in that sense as most American movies from earlier decades, including many movie musicals, were not released until after World War II,

when [...] the German-speaking film market opened up again for foreign film companies [...]. [Until then], the Hollywood studios had stockpiled literally hundreds of films they had not distributed in the territories of the former enemy during the war years, hoping that they would now bring additional profit. (Jubin, “Hollywood Musicals in Germany and Austria” 237)

As a result to make them more profitable, American movies were artistically altered in several ways. These practices included extensive cutting of scenes and adding of unambitious subtitles that “drastically change the meaning of certain film musicals and affected the reception by both the general public and film experts” (235).

Dubbing and subtitling American movies appears sensible when attempting to make them more accessible to German audiences. But in the case of movie musicals, translators see themselves faced with additional difficulties that can quickly lead to a skewed reception of American movie musicals in Germany. However, dubbing is so popular in Germany that “film musicals, especially family movies that are expected to find favour with the wider public, even have their songs dubbed into German” (236), regardless of any artistic discrepancy. Olaf Jubin finds himself puzzled by how

ignorant [Germans are of] what has been done to American film musicals, and [how they] do not realize that the German-language version is often nothing but a pale copy of the original. (249)

What could relativize this radical statement is the argument that German-language adaptations of the original allow a broader audience to connect with American movie

musicals on an emotional level, as dubbing and other adaptations for the German market have the ability to increase accessibility of American works.

As a compromise between accessibility and artistic cohesiveness, subtitling seems to be the better option here. During the 1970s, prose subtitles – as opposed to rhymed subtitles – became increasingly popular in Germany (see 241) as efforts were made to provide audiences with subtitles that do justice to the original lyrics. There seems to be a general problem with subtitles, however, which Jubin describes as “a tendency to jump to conclusions and to reduce artistic ambiguity to unequivocality” (244). A new approach was finally taken by the German public broadcasting station ZDF with its 1973 dubbed version of *West Side Story*, in which the original songs were kept and only subtitled (see 241).

Besides dubbing and subtitling, the practice of cutting scenes from American movies hindered German audiences from experiencing the original work (see 239). The cuts were motivated by the questionable efforts to tailor movies to German tastes in order to squeeze as much profit out of the market as possible. Distributors furthermore preferred musical numbers that were not performed on a stage in efforts to make movie musicals more palatable to German audiences. They also wanted to enlarge younger stars’ parts to make audiences want to see them in their future movies as well (see 239, 240, 245).

Finally, a new “understanding of movies as an art form that should be treated as such” was brought about by the new “socio-political climate” (241) of the 1970s. But while many popular movies were thus restored to their original form, this was not the case with most movie musicals “as the genre did not have much of a reputation in Germany” (241). This was, however, partly due to the sloppy treatment they had experienced in the past which, according to Jubin, ultimately lead to the notion that movie musicals were a “dumb, decidedly low-brow form of pastime for undemanding American audiences, foisted upon Germans” (241). It seems like the damaged reputation of American musicals could not be redeemed among German audiences.

MADE IN AMERICA, DESIGNED FOR THE WORLD?

In his article “Trafficking in Transnational Brands: The New ‘Broadway-Style’ Musical” (2014), David Savran explains that “[s]hows such as *The Lion King* and

Wicked may have premiered in New York, but their continuing multibillion-dollar success in cities on six continents suggests that the traffic in the most popular form of theatre in the world can no longer be linked to one metropolis or one national tradition” (318). Interestingly, *The Lion King* was developed based on the movie of the same name produced by Disney. Therefore, one might assume that the success of the musical version mostly lies in the popularity of the movie, which already featured many of the songs of the stage version. Then again, *Wicked* is based on a novel which is by far not as popular as the movie version of *The Lion King*, even more so outside of the United States. Hence, turning popular movie musicals into stage versions cannot be the only secret to international success. However, the fact that Disney keeps producing stage versions of its most popular movie musicals suggests that there is something about these movies and musicals that appeals to an international audience that may also be found in *Wicked*. In the following, international productions of the American musical will be discussed based on an examination of Disney movie musicals and their stage versions with a special focus on their reception in Germany.

It was as early as 1937 that Disney released their first feature-length movie musical, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. This hugely successful movie was followed by many more Disney movie musicals of which a majority also enjoyed great success outside of America. It is remarkable that already one year after its world premiere, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* premiered in Germany in a completely dubbed version. The company’s awareness of the importance of foreign markets for their musicals was later underlined when Disney decided to enter unknown territory by developing and premiering their original production of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996) in Berlin, Germany (see Müller). Today, all of Disney’s shows in Germany are translated replicas of films. All of them are produced by the German branch of the international production company Stage Entertainment, whose repertoire of twelve shows included five Disney musicals in January 2018. The company’s success proves that replicas of Disney musicals resonate well with German audiences (see Martland “Stage Entertainment”). But why is that so?

When Walt Disney was still supervising his studio himself, “thirteen or fourteen of the nineteen animated features [...] ha[d] their origins in Europe” (Allan 275), more precisely in European fairytales and folklore with many of the visuals also being created by European artists (275). These European influences surely

contributed to some extent to the positive reception that Disney movies have received in Europe. But this does not explain why stage musicals like *Tarzan*, *Aladdin*, or *The Lion King*, which do not draw on European folklore, would be successful in Germany.⁵ Frankly, it neither explains why they would be successful in the United States, either. Knapp suggests that apart from telling stories about America and Americans, “the American [m]usical has from the beginning traded in exoticism” by portraying “exotic difference commingled with the familiar” (249). He adds that there was a “European- and American-based tendency to define themselves as ‘the West’ in relation to an ‘Other’ – most often Eastern, [...] with a few distinctions concerning which particular ‘Other’ is involved” (249). Exoticism could in fact explain the international success of the above-mentioned Disney movies and stage musicals. However, exoticism is not exclusive to Disney musicals but rather a common trope in musicals that are concerned with the portrayal of the East in relation to the United States, like in *The King and I* (1951) or *Miss Saigon* (1989).

Based on the presumption that American musicals are targeted at an American audience, Disney shows would probably be best described as Western rather than American, as Disney always targets an international, westernized market.⁶ However, a certain national identity does not hinder musicals from having international success either. Or as Savran puts it: even if “a national [...] identity remains embedded [in a musical] the traffic in the most popular form of theatre in the world can no longer be linked to one metropolis or one national tradition” (318).

Besides exoticism, another factor that appears to be crucial for the international success of American musicals is that

[w]hatever larger problems may be posed in a particular show, their working out will frequently involve an interpersonal conflict among or between the lead characters, so that the success or failure of their personal relationships may be seen as an emblem for larger possibilities, as a marker for the resolution or continuation of conflicts between larger antagonistic forces. (Knapp 9)

5 Although none of the works explicitly mentions European folklore, all of the three have complex stories grounded in European imperialism.

6 It is worth noting that Disney musicals explicitly set in American history or culture, like *Newsies* (2011) and *High School Musical on Stage!* (2007), have only been released in the United States so far

Hence, even if an audience cannot fully grasp or relate to the cultural context of a musical, they can at least relate to the personal relationships, which can make an unfamiliar context more accessible. This explains why, e.g., *Legally Blonde* (2007) can be successful in the German-language market even though it is set in America, heavily references American college and popular culture, and does not rely much on exoticism. The general cultural themes of love, relationships, marriage, etc. are relatable experience for non-American Western audiences as well.

In conclusion, it might be fair to assume that some musicals are conceived for the international market from the very beginning. One of the aspects facilitating a musical's international success is emotionalizing the plot. Another aspect is embracing a Western identity rather than a national identity, e.g. by using exotic themes. All of this means that musicals developed in the United States and/or for the American market can be successful in Germany if they allow audiences to connect with the characters emotionally and if no specific American cultural knowledge is needed to be able to follow the plot.

LOST IN TRANSLATION?

When an American musical is supposed to be staged in Germany, the producers will have to decide whether they want to go for a translated version or if they want to keep the original lyrics and/or dialogues. By sticking with the original language, one would preserve the original poetry as well as the original score. By going for a German translation, producers would grant the audience a better opportunity to understand all the words and follow the plot. It stands to reason that a translated version of any musical cannot maintain all the original linguistic peculiarities, which, however, does not mean that the translation would always be of less poetic worth, nor that it would be less appreciated by audiences. But with the songs, translators are facing the additional challenge to make their rendition match the original number of notes, stresses, and rhyme schemes.

Among theater professionals, the opinions on translating foreign musicals into German diverge. In a survey conducted by the *Kurt Weill Foundation for Music* in 2012 among Germans working in the theater, the verdict was mostly to translate dialogue into German and to keep the songs in English (see Chisholm and Stein 10). One of the interviewees explains, that this way the audience is able to follow the

plot without having to deprive the lyrics of their “wit and cleverness” (10). Others insist on monolingual productions, preferably in German, for the sake of “the credibility of the characters and [the] plot” and to prevent that the audience “checks out” (10) during the songs and does not perceive them as devices of storytelling but rather as show acts only. Accordingly, monolingual productions dominate the German market as they are more likely to attract bigger crowds. Even though Germany’s public theaters do not strive to make profit like the private production companies do, their productions are usually completely in German, too. This allows their target audiences to fully understand the show, which public theaters seem to consider crucial for the enjoyment of musicals, opposed to, e.g., Italian operas, which are usually only subtitled.

On the one hand, a translated version allows for a more immersive theatrical experience as it becomes easier for the audience to be emotionally invested. On the other hand, some argue that one should not alter the original work to avoid artistic compromises. Both are valid points, and ultimately producers and creative directors will have to decide for one of them. Part of what makes this decision so difficult is the fact that the musical is not ‘extinct’ yet but still part of popular culture. While it might seem right to produce opera classics in their original language for a small circle of interested, competent experts, it would appear unusual to go for an English production of a family-friendly Disney musical in Germany. The intentions might be similar to what can be observed in the opera genre: Operas are usually shown in their original language attracting mostly expert audiences. Only operettas are regularly produced bilingually or completely translated, as their charm often lies more in the word play than in musical and dramatic aspirations. Since the dialogues are usually spoken, it makes them also easier to translate.

For the German private musical sector, it makes sense to focus on American musicals that do not rely on poetics but rather on spectacular music, scenic design, etc. to provide American musical theater to German audiences without running the risk of mutilating the essence of the original work. This, however, fuels the German notion of the American musical as not being demanding or complex (see “Alles für die Cats?”).

THE MUSICAL'S RECEPTION BY GERMAN CRITICS AND IN GERMAN ACADEMIA

In 2005, Olaf Jubin conducted a major research project at the Ruhr-University Bochum, in which 1,824 reviews of musicals by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Stephen Sondheim in the USA, the UK, and Germany, published between 1957 and 2002, were examined. One of the major findings of this project was that “critics who write about musical theatre tend to come from theatre, not from opera, music or dance” (“Experts without Expertise?” 186). Reviewers, thus, lack expertise in this field, which leads to critics applying the same standards to musicals that they use to theater – rather than adjusting their set of criteria. Another finding was that because “many of the hit musicals of the 1980s seemed [to the critics] predominantly escapist in character, reviewers across all nations chose not to look for any connections to current socio-political events” (187), which, in turn, nourishes the notion of the musical as being an intellectually and artistically undemanding form of entertainment. In Germany especially, a production will even be “received differently depending on where [it is] performed: in subsidized theatres or in privately owned commercial venues” (187).

Through Jubin’s study, it also became apparent how critics’ reviews were influenced by academic traditions:

German reviewers, especially in the 1970s and early 1980s, were heavily influenced by the critical theory of the Frankfurt school with its highly negative attitude towards any form of entertainment produced for the masses. (187)

Jubin also points out that German critics are heavily influenced by the reputation and fame of the actors, that they are – even with replica productions – heavily fixated on the director, and that they tend to automatically dismiss highly emotional musicals as trivial and as intellectually undemanding (see 187-189).

Not only the professional reviewers, but also German scholars struggled to come to terms with the musical, as the genre was not part of the academic discourse until the late 1980s (see Grosch 12). Even though the genre had been around in Germany for much longer, German scholars have been ignoring it until the boom of the 1980s and 1990s made that impossible. Just as other genres of American popular culture, the American musical was paid little attention to in German

academia in the decades following World War II, because Germans feared the replacement of their culture by “the capitalist, lowbrow culture of the already military victorious America” (9, my translation).

As a result, few American musical composers were taken seriously by German academics, except for those who also composed operas and symphonies, e.g., Leonard Bernstein, George Gershwin, or Kurt Weill (see 12).⁷ Such selective discussions of American composers testify to the (implicit) attempts by German scholars to use a “framing of the American genre in the tradition of the anti-American notions which have developed since the end of the 19th century” (15, my translation).⁸ According to Grosch, the progress in the discourse on the American musical in Germany seems to be particularly slow and arduous (see 17).⁹

In conclusion, it can be said that many German critics’ and scholars’ views on the American musical are often skewed. While the discourse in German academia appears to be approaching an extensive, professional examination of the genre (see Grosch 15), there does not seem to be a similar tendency when it comes to German critics. In fact, Jubin notes that German critics reviewing musicals still “only have a cursory acquaintance with musical theater and its history” (194) and that as much as 23.8% of the evaluated German reviews contain factual errors (see 194).

GERMAN MUSICALS AND RECENT TRENDS

Musicals, and the American musical in particular, might still be wrongfully looked at as merely a form of ‘lowbrow’ entertainment for the masses. However, this might rather have to do with the critics’ flawed analyses of the genre, its history and purpose, and a disputable distinction between lowbrow and highbrow culture that often seeps through musical reviews. Even though the sudden increase in popularity during the boom of the mega musical has slowed down, Germany’s private musical

7 Weill might also have been held in higher esteem because he was a German who immigrated to the United States.

8 Original quote: “Eine solche Kontextualisierung beschreibt paradigmatisch die spezifische Form eines deutschen Framing der US-amerikanischen Gattung, die den schon seit Ende des 19. Jahrhundert sich herausbildenden Amerikaklischees zu entsprechen scheint wie kaum ein anderes Kulturgut der neuen Welt“ (Grosch 15).

9 However, it is questionable why geographical location defines the quality or accessibility of a scholarly work today. Grosch probably sees a lack of international academic cooperation in the field of musical theater studies on behalf of Germany-based scholars.

producers still manage to increase visitor numbers (see Olbermann) as audiences continue to flock into theaters to appreciate the pleasures of the live entertainment musical.

The central legacy of the boom-era seems to be the tradition of bringing translated replica productions of Broadway and West End musicals to Germany and to cooperate with influential license holders like Disney and Cameron Mackintosh (see Martland “Stage Entertainment”). However, Bert Fink, chief creative officer at MTI Europe,¹⁰ admits that in the past, “once [a Broadway or West End musical] started going into the foreign-language market, producers very often lost control” (Martland, “Big in Europe” 16). A way to avoid this dilemma might be to develop original German musicals that are tailored for the German market. In fact, there have been many such attempts. A recent example is *Das Wunder von Bern*, which premiered in Hamburg in 2014 and had a successful two-year run in the newly-built *Theater an der Elbe*. The musical is based on the 2003 movie of the same name, which tells the story of the German national soccer team winning the 1954 world championship in Bern, Switzerland.

By developing this original musical, producer Stage Entertainment followed the example of the Viennese musical theater association *Vereinigte Bühnen Wien*, which has developed many original musicals that have been very successful in the German-speaking market (see 16). But while Stage Entertainment had to financially mount the development of *Das Wunder von Bern* by itself, *Vereinigte Bühnen Wien*’s “activities are partly subsidized by the city of Vienna, which also owns it” (16). The Viennese theater syndicate has also shown that even though their musicals are conceived for the Austrian market, they are “[f]ar from being [...] parochial” (16), thanks to the efforts of their international creative team. The success of *Vereinigte Bühnen Wien* indicates that subsidized theaters can afford developing Broadway-sized new musicals more than private producers in Germany, who very much depend on a production’s immediate success.

A new strategy can be seen in Stage Entertainment’s most recent original production of *Fack Ju Göhte* (2018), a musical adaptation of a popular teenager-movie, for which the company has built a new theater into an old Munich factory. It appears that the company is planning to use this smaller venue as a test location for the low-budget development of daring, original musicals. Their current

10 Major shareholder of Cameron Mackintosh (see Martland “Big in Europe”).

production of *Ghost* (2018) in Berlin also shows that the division within Germany's musical theater landscape might become less of an obstacle in the future, as this production is the result of a cooperation of Stage Entertainment and the publicly subsidized Austrian *Landestheater Linz*. The company has also cooperated with German universities for tryout runs of potential new expensive musical productions, e. g. *Goethe!* (2017), an adaptation of the 2010 movie of the same name, at Folkwang University of the Arts in Essen.

These developments suggest that Germany's musical scene might be in a process of emancipation from the American and British market. However, it does not mean that musicals will stop being associated with their American heritage. In fact, "modern movie musicals, and TV series like *Smash* and *Glee*, plus the influence of the internet (particularly YouTube)" (Martland, "Big in Europe" 16) provide access to classic and contemporary American musical theater to young audiences worldwide resulting in "an enormous rebirth of interest in the genre, which has rippled into the non-English-speaking market" (16). A potential outcome of this development could be that in the future, German audiences will have a more nuanced understanding and appreciation of the American musical, which could also result in a greater variety within Germany's musical theater scene.

CONCLUSION

The reception of the American musical in Germany is heavily influenced by German audiences' expectations of musicals, namely that they should be entertaining, but not necessarily demanding. These expectations are partly rooted in notions of German cultural identity and limited exposure to the genre resulting in little knowledge of the musical, its diverse repertoire, its history, and its original cultural context. Similarly, a disdain for commercially produced art or the mistrust to accept commercially produced art as complex further shaped the perception of the musical; a German mannerisms to see the musical as an American turn on European theater traditions rather than as an autonomous American art form contributed further to such assessment. Such views are particularly pertinent among German theater critics, whose knowledge of the genre is often flawed. Even German academia engaged with the musicals in a broader sense not until the 'mega musical' period of the late 1980s.

The skewed perception of the American musical's history, cultural context, and repertoire is mostly due to limited accessibility and availability of American musical theater in Germany. One reason is that in the decades following World War II, Germany's theater landscape did not allow for productions of Broadway-scale musicals until private production companies popularized the genre by importing translated replica-productions and commissioned the construction of new suitable theaters across the country. On the other hand, producers and distributors of American movie musicals treat the foreign markets "as a mere extension of the home market" ("Hollywood Musical in Germany and Austria" 235). As a result, many movie musicals were not released in Germany at all or only in altered versions, which further impedes the reception of the American musicals in Germany.

To this day, German audiences tend to see the musical as merely popular entertainment rather than as a complex genre. Such perceptions lead to one-sided expectations of the genre, which leaves few opportunities to introduce any American musical that one might consider to be more artistically elevated and/or intellectually demanding to German audiences. Therefore, a musical that is well received in America does not necessarily need to be well received in Germany, too. German audiences have distinctly different expectations towards the genre. The current state of the genre in Germany does not allow for a comprehensive reception of the American musical.

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