H-France Review Vol. 23 (June 2023), No. 109

Olaf Jubin, ed. *Paris and the Musical: The City of Light on Stage and Screen.* London: Routledge, 2021. x + 396 pp. Notes, photographs, and index. $136.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781138611061; $39.16 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9781138611092; $39.16 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9780429465437.

Review by Vanessa R. Schwartz, University of Southern California.

This wide-ranging edited volume takes Paris musicals on stage and screen as its subject, offering a series of relatively short essays that create a rich inventory, rather than a single argument about the intersection of the City of Light with a theatrical and cinematic genre in which the French have not specialized, at least since the mid-nineteenth century. Although that very paradox--so many shows about Paris written outside of France--might have been one of any number of organizing questions for the volume, this mixed bag of individual essays describes certain themes such as fashion and sometimes track the production history of one particular show across time, format and national tradition (in particular one essay on *The Merry Widow*). Yet for those with expertise regarding the history of France and its capital, there is very little new that this volume illuminates about the city itself. This may be because many of these musicals are already well-known objects of study and also because they tend to re-play clichés about Paris, rather than generate novel or even original takes on France.

Paris musicals, we learn, offer audiences the thrills of tourism, sex, fashion; the dignity of individual liberty and freedom; and consider the intersection of art and entertainment. These are all well-trodden topics associated with the capital of the nineteenth century. What the volume offers us is the chance to ponder whether musicals created these associations or simply perpetuated them, or both. The organization of the volume is loosely chronological yet offers no history of the stage and screen musical as such against which to consider the significance of the development of the genre in relation to the subject of Paris. An introductory essay addressing the history of musicals would have perhaps been more useful to French historians than Venita Datta's summary of Paris as cultural symbol. The volume's sections are topical: "Capital Paris," "Naughty Paris," and "Artistic Paris" or organized by medium and place: "Broadway Paris," "Hollywood Paris," "West End Paris." There is virtually no treatment of the French musical tradition about which historians of France would surely be eager to learn more.

If the nineteenth-century *opéra-bouffe* is as much a key predecessor to the Anglo-American musical comedy of the twentieth century as the Viennese operetta, it is surprising that the German-born and French-by-adoption Jacques Offenbach is barely mentioned in the volume. An essay treating a key work such as "La Vie Parisienne," which opened in 1866, with a cast of characters including tourists from the world over who come to sing, scream, eat, and love in

Paris, might have offered the volume a productive starting point for the specificity of the intersection of the history of Paris and the history of the musical that it seeks to illuminate, or would at least acknowledge the French role in producing "images" of Paris that foreigners replayed as both audiences for such shows, as well as musical authors working in other national traditions.

But there is even more value in considering nineteenth-century French *opéra-bouffe* in regard to the history of musicals. Even then and there, Jews were key creative figures in musical theater. Offenbach was the son of a cantor. Ludovic Halévy, one of the two librettists of "La Vie Parisienne," was a cantor's grandson as well as the nephew of Fromenthal Halévy, who wrote the well-known opera, "La Juive." This story later plays itself out in the "The Jazz Singer" (1927), which recounts the decision of a cantor's son to choose popular music over ritual song. The film also features what became "great American songbook" numbers, which were written largely by Jewish immigrants such as Irving Berlin and George Gershwin. In fact, as many historians of the songbook have observed, Cole Porter, (taken up in the volume in an essay by Hannah Robbins because of his personal connection to the city) who was the most significant writer in the tradition who was not Jewish, frequently wrote songs in the minor key (thus like Jewish music) and always said he would have been a better songsmith if he had been.[1]

Writing about live performance and movies requires a great deal of exposition in order for readers unfamiliar with the cultural objects under review to follow along. As a result, many of the essays are elaborate summaries of plots, with occasional considerations of song lyrics. Although the vast majority of volume's authors are experts in film or theater primarily, they offer surprisingly little by the way of formal analysis nor do they emphasize the importance of the musical under discussion in the context of theatrical or cinematic history when they do offer production history. An exception is Stewart Nicholls's "Seduced by Paris: Irma La Douce and its journey to Broadway," which stands out for its rich contextualization. He locates the French-spun show and its international history within the void of period French-written musical comedies while also trying to account for what French musical culture was like at mid-century. Maya Cantu's essay "Dressed by Paris" is a gift to those who, like me, think that *No Strings*, the star vehicle Richard Rodgers wrote for Black actress Diahann Carroll, should be better known. Rodgers's dedication to not foregrounding the show's romance as one between a Black woman and a White man is a liberal racial politics of another era--and no surprise coming from Rodgers (who also had a French Jewish ancestry on his paternal grandmother's side). Rodgers's own racial politics were inflected by his American-Jewish assimilationism.

In many of the volume's essays, Paris in musicals is not really at the heart of the analysis. Daniel Batchelder, in his essay "Paris by hand: *Gay Purr-ee* and *The Aristocats*," offers a discussion of mid-century animation by pitting two French cat films, by UPA and Disney respectively, against each other. His essay points to the history of Disney's domination of animation but it does not mention the French themes in earlier films such as *Cinderella* or the French decorative arts inspiration of *Sleeping Beauty*. He does not ask why Disney animation stepped up its dedication to French themes after *The Aristocats* in *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996) and *Ratatouille* (2007), which is now also becoming a musical. He lauds the stylistic originality of the UPA studio but more consideration of why their simple style might have worked better for the short films and ad work in which they specialized might help explain why they made so few features--beyond the sheer expense of such an enterprise which only studios such as Disney and Pixar have managed to render profitable, mostly through tie-ins. Those with an investment in

the history of animation might have hoped for greater consideration of the connection to the French invention of the movies via animation (Emile Reynaud and Emile Cohl). Those with an investment in cartoon cats (Krazy Kat, Sylvester, Fritz the Cat) are left in the cold with the alley cats. Those wondering about French accents in films might have wanted the author to connect this material to Pepé le Pew (a cartoon skunk in seductive pursuit of a cat) or to the Hungarian Jewish Gabor sisters for whom "Frenchness films" were a major career boon. Eva was in *Gigi* and voiced Duchess in *The Aristocats*; Zsa Zsa featured in Huston's *Moulin Rouge* (barely discussed in Toulza's essay on the more recent Luhrmann film) and in *Lili*, a Leslie Caron film that spawned a popular 1953 song, complete with French accordion, "Hi Lili, Hi Lo."

In the end, the advantage of a multi-essay volume such as this one is that it affords us the opportunity to ask, "when is a musical about Paris and when is Paris a mere backdrop?" Having just seen a recent production of Sondheim and Lapine's *Sunday in the Park with George*, I was struck by its complete disengagement with Paris (and Chicago). If I wanted students to learn something--anything--about Paris via a musical, I would sooner send them to *Les Miz*. In his essay, Robert Lawson-Peebles proposes that place is important for what he and others have identified as a show otherwise about creativity and the artistic process. Yet if there were ever an example of Paris as mere backdrop for a story about art,it is *Sunday in the Park*. Lapine claims they had no idea what the show would be about other than the creative process (which came on the heels of Sondheim's greatest failure, *Merrily We Roll Along*, so the matter worried Sondheim in new ways at that moment in his career). Lapine recalls showing Sondheim a postcard of the Grande Jatte painting (*Un dimanche après-midi à l'île de la Grande Jatte*, Georges Seurat, 1884-1886) and the two of them agreeing it looked like a theatrical tableau. The more they learned, the more the short life and small output by Seurat worked for Sondheim because he did not care about the painter, Paris, Chicago, or anything but "finishing the hat"--a song from the show he used to title his two-volume memoir. *Sunday in the Park* offers no "Paris" song. The artist is not even the painter of modern life. The artist here, is not in the world. He silences the external voices. He watches the world from his window. He keeps mapping out the sky, while he finishes a hat. "Look I made a hat/Where there never was a hat." The plethora of Paris musicals reviewed here derived from the central role France played in world history and also in musical and artistic culture, high and low. Absent that, France has become an empty canvas--perhaps a fate better than the revisionist shows such as *Hamilton*, in which Lafayette, turned into a cartoon-like Ninja warrior, supports the war for Independence as was the case but one which altogether skips Franklin and Jefferson's time in Paris serving as a seedbed of American republicanism. If America is made in the image of *Hamilton*, who needs Paris anyway?

NOTES

[1] David Lehman, *A Fine Romance*: *Jewish Songwriters, American Songs* (Schocken Books, 2009).

LIST OF ESSAYS

Olaf Jubin, "Introduction"

Part One, Capital Paris

Venita Datta, "Paris as a Symbol (1852-1914)"

Pierre-Olivier Toulza and Tresi Murphy, "The Paradoxical 'Frenchness' of an Australian Musical: Baz Luhrmann's Moulin Rouge!"

Olaf Jubin, "Conclusion"

Vanessa R. Schwartz
University of Southern California
vschwart@usc.edu

ISSN 1553-9172