



Point of view: The musical theater of our political theater

BY JAKE JOHNSON

Published: Sun, December 22, 2019 1:06 AM | Updated: Sun, December 22, 2019 1:33 AM



Jake Johnson

Before answering Donald Trump's call to pull the stopper on Washington, D.C.'s swamp, Rudy Giuliani took a bow for draining another city's swamp — New York's Times Square.

Not that long ago a gritty, peep-show-filled pocket of Manhattan, Times Square now houses Disney and an Applebees, thanks in part to former mayor Giuliani's redevelopment efforts. Musicals may owe him a lot. Shortly after 9/11, Giuliani propped up his city's economy by propping up the Broadway industry. "If you really want to help New York City," he said, "come to New York. Go to a play. Spend money in New York City."

Money indeed. Serving a seemingly endless stream of tourists, Broadway today has become a bastion of conservatism: Golden Age revivals, spectacle acts, or films-made-into-musicals fill theaters and the city's coffers.

Giuliani is an unsuspecting impresario, but then again so is his boss. Americans may have put a reality star in the Oval Office, but the ballot seems to have been cast for fantasy, not reality. Giuliani, Trump and musicals are all major exports of New York and share a fantastical relationship with the truth.

"Truth isn't truth," Giuliani told cameras last year, defending a man whose statements PolitiFact rated as over 70% "mostly false, false, or pants on fire." Musicals, meanwhile, are also patently unreal. Broadway traffics in fact when it means fiction, makes up endings to better fit the narrative, and makes fistfuls of cash doing it. Jazz hands, song and dance routines, choreographed show-stoppers — all reasons enough to either love 'em or hate 'em. They are what they are, and so we could say of the major players in this administration.

Recall when Mike Pence took a victory lap after the election to see "Hamilton," that Barack Obama-era staging of America's founding as told by today's American underclass. Pence was chided during the curtain call for backing an administration openly antagonizing immigrants. Never mind the real Alexander Hamilton may himself have been a light-skinned immigrant but would hardly fit the poster child of today's immigrant rights activists who nonetheless see in the musical Hamilton their preferred Hamilton. Fictions tilting against fictions.

Of course, the stakes for being an actual immigrant today are wildly different from playing one on stage. But if you understand musicals, you may better understand these post-truth days. Whatever binds together our political theater and musical theater is bipartisan — a love for making convenient fictions out of inconvenient truth. Musicals are like the Trojan horse of the Trump era; they entice for precisely the same reasons the Trump administration succeeds. They are completely true to their untrue selves.

Johnson teaches music at Oklahoma City University and is the author of "Mormons, Musical Theater, and Belonging in America."

5 Article(s)
Remaining

Subscribe Today & Support Local Journalism: [Subscribe Today](#)

Already have a
subscription?
Login or Activate