“Reviewing the Situation”: *Oliver!* and the Musical Afterlife of Dickens’s Novels

Marc Napolitano

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English and Comparative Literature.

Chapel Hill
2009

Approved by

Advisor: Allan Life

Reader: Laurie Langbauer

Reader: Tom Reinert

Reader: Beverly Taylor

Reader: Tim Carter
ABSTRACT

Marc Napolitano: “Reviewing the Situation”: Oliver! and the Musical Afterlife of Dickens’s Novels
(Under the direction of Allan Life)

This project presents an analysis of various musical adaptations of the works of Charles Dickens. Transforming novels into musicals usually entails significant complications due to the divergent narrative techniques employed by novelists and composers or librettists. In spite of these difficulties, Dickens’s novels have continually been utilized as sources for stage and film musicals.

This dissertation initially explores the elements of the author’s novels which render his works more suitable sources for musicalization than the texts of virtually any other canonical novelist. Subsequently, the project examines some of the larger and more complex issues associated with the adaptation of Dickens’s works into musicals, specifically, the question of preserving the overt Englishness of one of the most conspicuously British authors in literary history while simultaneously incorporating him into a genre that is closely connected with the techniques, talents, and tendencies of the American stage.

A comprehensive overview of Lionel Bart’s Oliver! (1960), the most influential Dickensian musical of all time, serves to introduce the predominant theoretical concerns regarding the modification of Dickens’s texts for the musical stage and screen. These issues include the history of utilizing songs in theatrical adaptations of the author’s novels, the tendency of composers to eliminate the darker elements of his works when adapting him to the family-friendly standards of the musical genre, the modification or elimination of Boz’s
narrative voice in such adaptations, and finally, the cultural exchange that is often essential to inserting the British writer into an American medium. Each one of these theoretical issues is then examined in greater depth through the exploration of additional Dickensian musicals including Leslie Bricusse and Cyril Ornadel’s *Pickwick* (1963), Rupert Holmes’s *Drood* (1985), Alan Menken’s *A Christmas Carol: The Musical* (1994), and various other adaptations produced in the years following *Oliver!*
To my first and greatest teacher: my mother, Joann.
PREFACE

As in the case of Mr. Dickens himself, my fondness for the theater emerged at an early age. While my elementary school never had a drama program in the strictest sense of the term, a team of soccer-moms annually undertook the arduous task of arranging a musical revue so that those of us who wanted to participate in dramatic productions would have an outlet for our theatrical interests. Although the shows were hardly masterpieces, and although our parents seemed more interested in photographing us in our costumes than paying attention to what exactly we were attempting to enact (which may have been for the best given our acting abilities, or lack thereof), I remember the palpable sense of excitement that everyone felt when the yearly set of musical numbers was revealed.

In the fifth grade, my classmates were especially excited because the annual show was going to include songs from *Grease*. For reasons which I cannot quite comprehend to this day, my peers were all infatuated with this musical, almost to the same degree that today’s youth is entranced by the *High School Musical* franchise (though I am somewhat relieved that the current generation is idolizing clean-cut kids who dance on cafeteria tables and play basketball as opposed to venerating chain-smoking greasers who cut classes and go drag-racing.) Among the other songs in this revue were two numbers from a show called *Oliver!* with which I was likewise unfamiliar, though in this instance, I was not alone. None of my classmates seemed to know anything about *Oliver*!, and while the interest in performing songs from *Grease* was tangible, the interest in performing songs from *Oliver*! was virtually nonexistent.

At the urging of my friends, I rented the film version of *Grease*, and though I found it moderately entertaining, I failed to see what all the fuss was about. I soon discovered that there was a film version of *Oliver!* as well, and my father, who remembered having been very fond of the movie, encouraged me to rent it. I did as he suggested, and from the moment that the workhouse orphans descended the dilapidated staircase to sing “Food, Glorious Food,” I was enthralled. I wept for Oliver, delighted at the antics of the Artful Dodger, cowered in the presence of Bill Sikes, fell slightly in love with Nancy, and was instantly captivated by Fagin, so much so that I could actually see myself joining the ranks of the pintsized pickpockets who made up his gang. Equally captivating was the film’s musical score, and Lionel Bart’s melodies immediately embedded themselves in my memory. Though few of my classmates seemed particularly excited about our singing “Consider Yourself” in the revue, I was delighted at the thought of stepping into the role of a Cockney urchin and crooning the Dodger’s song of welcome.

If someone had told me then that I would one day be an aspiring Dickensian scholar whose doctoral dissertation would focus primarily on musical adaptations like *Oliver!*., I probably would not have believed him. Nevertheless, my fondness for *Oliver!* has brought things full
circle, for it was Oliver! that served as my unofficial introduction to Dickens. Though I would be in for some unpleasant surprises a few years later when I actually took up Oliver Twist for the first time (the thought of Fagin as an evil villain was shocking), Oliver! marked the beginning of what would become a lifelong fascination with the world of Dickens’s stories. While my fondness for Boz’s novels has since eclipsed my fondness for the film and stage adaptations that first introduced me to the very concept of Dickensian London, I might never have found an entryway into this world had it not been for musicals like Oliver!, Scrooge, and The Muppet Christmas Carol. In many ways, my fondness for Dickens and my fondness for musicals are indelibly connected.

I doubt that many graduate students are given the pleasure of working on projects that involve their studying the two subjects they love most—in my case, Dickens and musical theater. Consequently, I am deeply indebted to my dissertation director, Dr. Allan Life, for his constant encouragement in this endeavor. I could not have hoped for a more patient, supportive, and understanding advisor over the course of this process. I am also grateful to Dr. Laurie Langbauer, Dr. Tom Reinert, Dr. Beverly Taylor, and Dr. Tim Carter, the other professors on my committee, without whom this project would not have been possible. The guidance of Dr. Deborah Thomas and my former professors in the Villanova English Department has likewise been indispensable. Finally, I must acknowledge the friendship of my fellow graduate students, particularly Emily Brewer, Marc Cohen, Julie Fann, and Sarah Hallenbeck, each of whom played a role in my very decision to attend UNC.

Over the course of my research, I have received a significant amount of assistance from a wide variety of people. I would like to thank the numerous archivists, librarians, producers, and theater managers who aided me in my exploration of the history behind Oliver! and the other musicals covered in this project, including Sir Cameron Mackintosh, Derek Dawson, Rosy Runciman of the Mackintosh Archives, Brenda Evans of the Lionel Bart Foundation, Paul Roy Goodhead of the Anthony Newley Appreciation Society, and John Watson of the Harry Ransom Center at UT Austin. I also had the honor of speaking with several of the creative artists who helped give life to the musicals documented in this dissertation, and their reflections provided fascinating insights into the development of these adaptations. My fondest thanks to Patti Cohenour, Al Kasha, Mark Lester, Howard McGillin, Jill Santoriello, and Paul Williams.

To conclude, no expression of gratitude would be complete without acknowledging my family, whose faith has sustained me throughout the rigors of graduate school, and whose love I am thankful for every day of my life. To my mother, father, brother, sister, nanna, and nonno (Requiescat in Pace), I am grateful to you beyond words. As such, I will let Lionel Bart’s words speak for me in this instance:

I’d do anything for you, dears, anything
   For you mean everything to me!
I’d go anywhere for your smiles, anywhere
   For your smiles, everywhere, I’d see!

For your kindness, patience, prayers, and wisdom, I am eternally grateful. God bless you.
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Charles Dickens’s literary legacy is founded upon several elements in his writings which have defined his prose style in both scholarly and popular discourse. Dickens was a gifted teller of stories, and the enthralling quality of his novels, even those which feature highly episodic plots, is firmly ingrained in the author’s capability to connect with the reader through his engaging narrative technique. Dickens’s descriptive abilities, along with his talent for placing the reader into a scene through his meticulous attention to detail, are also fundamental components of his writing style. Perhaps the paramount trait of the author’s prose is connected directly to the individuals who populate the worlds he created in his novels. Since the era in which he wrote, Dickens’s legacy has been inestimably linked to the legacy of his characters.

If asked to list the dominant traits that define Dickensian characters, certain qualities immediately come to mind: humor, theatricality, linguistic idiosyncrasy, and physically manifested psychological quirks. While these particular traits are among the most memorable attributes of Dickens’s creations, a less recognized characteristic of these individuals is their musicality. A significant number of characters in the Dickens canon engage in musical activities for the pleasure afforded by these pursuits. These Dickensian musicians include Mr. Morfin, who is fond of his violoncello; Rosa Dartle, who plays on the harp as a way of expelling her excessive passions; Tom Pinch, whose somber organ music sets the tone for the final pages of *Martin Chuzzlewit*; and Frederick Dorrit, who always
keeps his clarinet case close at hand. There are several notable dancers and dancing students in the Dickens canon as well, including Fanny Dorrit, Caddy Jellyby, and the numerous other patrons of Mr. Turveydrop’s academy. The number of singers in Dickens’s novels is even larger, and several characters’ personalities are defined by their love of song. Obvious examples include Dick Swiveller and Captain Cuttle, but there are many other characters in the canon who enthusiastically reference popular airs of the period.¹

Though music clearly plays a significant role in Dickens’s novels, it has also been used as a medium for the adaptation of the author’s texts. Paul Schlicke recounts that numerous composers in the nineteenth century wrote instrumental movements and parlor songs based on Dickens’s novels and characters (Oxford 394), and James T. Lightwood gives a detailed catalog of these songs in the appendix to his text on Dickens and music (172-177). Lightwood’s list contains songs and movements inspired by Dickens’s novels, Christmas books, and even his less widely remembered short pieces. Such tunes include “The Pickwick Quadrille” by Fred Ravellin; the “Barnaby Rudge Tarantelle” and the “Little Dorrit Serenade,” both by Clementine Ward; “The Nicholas Nickleby Quadrille and Nickleby Gallop” by Sydney Vernon; and countless waltzes and ballads based on the characters of Little Nell and Dolly Varden. Even more obscure persons like Gabriel Grub and Master Humphrey were the inspiration for cantatas and quadrilles. The fact that Dickens’s iconic characters were so universally celebrated in the author’s day that composers of the period took to creating songs and dances named for these fictional creations is a testament to the author’s unprecedented popularity. It also testifies to certain qualities in the characters

¹ Lillian M. Ruff states that there are more than 200 allusions to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century songs in the Dickens canon, several of which have yet to be identified (31).
themselves which seem to transcend traditional means of discourse and elevate these unique individuals to a more melodious medium of expression.

Obviously, this use of Dickens’s characters is just one example of a larger tendency throughout the nineteenth century to exploit the author’s popularity. The widespread appeal of Dickens’s novels led to his works constantly being pirated for the stage by hack playwrights; the songwriters who attached the names of his characters to their pieces clearly had similar motivations. Nevertheless, the fact that Dickens’s characters could be utilized in such a way by songwriters underscores the grand, romantic qualities of these individuals. As mentioned, many of them possess musical talents, but this detail is not nearly as important as the fact that they possess a vitality and sensitivity which seems inherently suitable for musical purposes.

The musical possibilities of Dickens’s characters have not escaped present-day composers. Whereas nineteenth-century variations on Dickens usually took the form of individual songs or movements based on various Dickensian characters, twentieth- and twenty-first century adaptations have often taken the form of musicals. These adaptations of Dickens’s works are clearly part of the larger legacy of Dickensian adaptations, but they are simultaneously distinctive given the criticality of music and song to these particular versions of his novels.

Much scholarly work has been done on the adaptability and longevity of Dickens’s novels; there have been numerous texts written on such topics as “Dickens on Stage,” “Dickens on Film,” and “Dickens in Multimedia.” Furthermore, there have been numerous critical studies of Dickens and music. The natural combination of these subjects would be a study of Dickens’s adaptability to the conventions of the genre which we now define as the stage and film musical, and yet, this topic has been ignored in Dickensian discourse—a curious
omission given the sheer number of modern musical adaptations of Boz’s novels. Over the past fifty years there has been at least one musical version of ten of Dickens’s major works including *A Christmas Carol*.

The lack of scholarly material available regarding Dickens’s legacy in the musical genre reflects a larger indifference toward the musical from a scholarly point of view, an indifference which, up until recently, has prevented the musical from entering into academic critical discourse. Given that the musical has been all but ignored in academic circles, it may seem futile to present a study of Dickensian musicals. Though the number of these adaptations produced over the past fifty years is obviously impressive, it might simply be discarded as another manifestation of Dickens’s popularity. Furthermore, the phenomenal success of Lionel Bart’s *Oliver!* (1960) was clearly of fundamental importance to the production of many of the subsequent musical adaptations of Dickens’s works. Studying the legacy of the Dickensian musical is in many ways synonymous with studying the legacy of Bart’s masterpiece, a fact which seemingly narrows the significance of any such investigation.

Nevertheless, there is much to learn from an analysis of Dickens as a source for musical adaptations. Dickens, as a novelist, wrote in a literary genre that bears little relevance to the musical genre. Traditionally, librettists and composers have been loath to turn to novels as potential sources for musicals, due in part to various complications engendered by the differences in the narrative forms. Many of the musical adaptations written in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, the golden age of the American book show, were taken from either plays or collections of short stories.
The preference for plays over novels as sources for librettos is understandable, for in a dramatic work, the characters’ theatrical personalities have already been created and the action has been laid out in a fashion which fits the conventions of the stage. Classic musicals like *Oklahoma!, Carousel, My Fair Lady,* and *West Side Story* were all adapted from dramatic source material. Short story collections proved another valuable source for musical adaptations during this period, as the succinctness of each story, along with the flexibility granted to librettists in their ability to select which specific stories to incorporate into the show’s narrative, allowed for a level of freedom that other non-dramatic literary forms did not grant the adaptors. Several acclaimed adaptations of the golden age, including *South Pacific, Guys and Dolls,* and *Fiddler on the Roof,* were based on specific pieces from various story collections.

Adapting a novel into a musical is more complicated. Whereas plays traditionally focus on externalized action and dialogue, most novels are much more internalized. Furthermore, whereas short story collections, with their episodic format, present various opportunities for the incorporation of songs based on whatever stories the librettists choose to incorporate into the central narrative, novels are not nearly as flexible. The sheer breadth of many novels prevents librettists from exercising the same level of control that short stories grant them when writing the book. Instead of synthesizing elements of specific stories which seem to fit together into a coherent format, librettists who adapt novels into musicals must focus on cutting the literary work down to its fundamental components while retaining the moments in the story most open to the incorporation of music. It is a difficult balancing act.

Despite the fact that novels have not proved as conducive to musical adaptation as dramatic works such as plays and films, or shorter literary works such as stories, more than
half of Dickens’s novels have been adapted into musicals. Though his popularity is clearly an important factor here, it seems implausible to justify such a proliferation of adaptations based solely on the author’s widespread appeal. Other canonical authors such as Jane Austen and Charlotte Bronte are equally popular and have likewise been adapted for stage and screen countless times. Nevertheless, Austen and Bronte have never been embraced by the musical community in the same fashion as Dickens. Furthermore, though many of the musical versions of Dickens’s novels produced in the wake of Oliver! may have been part of a “Dickensian fad” initiated by Lionel Bart, Boz’s works are still being adapted into musicals today, a testament to the attractiveness of Dickens as a source. Undoubtedly, there are certain facets of Dickens’s writing style which have made him more compatible with the process of musical adaptation than virtually any other novelist.

The world of musical theater is a world of passionate emotions. Even lighthearted shows are built around a strong level of emotionality, for incorporating strong feelings is the only way to justify singing as a means of expression. Most musicals alternate between speech and song, and a character who is capable of both speaking and singing needs a reason for transitioning from one method of communication to the other. Simultaneously, the characters who sing in musicals must possess the qualities necessary to make this convention work. Essentially, the characters must demonstrate the grand and romantic traits which make them seem capable of expressing themselves through music. Finally, musical theater, more so than traditional theater, is founded upon a desire to connect with an audience. Even when characters do not break the “fourth wall” while singing, they are still actively engaging the audience through a dynamic means of communication. As Martin Gottfried puts it, “the Broadway musical is not a passive theater. Its audiences are transformed as they are being
made love to” (343). Though this may seem like hyperbole, Gottfried’s comments underscore the importance of passionate emotions to the foundations of musical theater.

The theatrical quality of Dickens’s writing style, a subject which has been studied extensively, is an important element of his legacy to consider in the context of this argument. Dickens’s fascination with the stage was an enduring passion that shaped both his life and his works. Since his theatrical interests were inseparable from his personality, it is not surprising that they play such a key role in the philosophy of Dickens, the artist.

From a creative and professional standpoint, the relationship between Dickens and the theater was symbiotic, for Dickens borrowed from and contributed to the Victorian theater. Many characters and situations presented in Dickens’s early fiction were inspired by the conventions and personalities essential to Victorian drama and melodrama. Simultaneously, Dickens’s novels proved fruitful sources for many Victorian playwrights eager to turn a profit through a marketable melodrama; the number of unlicensed adaptations of Dickens’s novels produced during the Victorian era is staggering. In Dickens, Novel Reading, and the Victorian Popular Theatre, Deborah Vlock assesses the “ironic regression” of Dickens’s characters, who had been “borrowed from melodrama and rendered magnificently larger and more complex than their sources [only to be] deflated and returned to their origins” (27). Vlock cites Nicholas Nickleby as the quintessential example of this pattern, as Ralph Nickleby is clearly adopted (and adapted) from the stage villains of traditional melodramas: he is a miser who plots against two helpless girls. However, Dickens instills Ralph with greater depth than his theatrical forebears; there are key moments in the text where the author focuses on Ralph’s regrets over his treatment of his niece, and such moments help to transform a one-dimensional caricature into a more fully human character. When chapters of
Nicholas Nickleby were subsequently adapted into stage melodramas, however, Ralph returned to his roots and lost whatever depth Dickens had instilled in him.

This cycle reinforces the connections between Dickens and the theater. The unfortunate consequence is that few readers remember the multi-dimensional attributes that Dickens added to his characters—the melodramatic stereotypes upon which he built some of these characters are what stand out. Although the theater was an essential facet of Dickens’s life and works, theatricality has become a pejorative term used to describe the author’s excesses. Nevertheless, these same excesses are a contributing factor to Dickens’s suitability as a source for musicals.

Emotion, or perhaps more specifically, emotional catharsis, is a crucial element of musical theater. Scott Miller describes the criticality of emotion to the genre, noting that:

The great director and teacher Konstantin Stanislavski said that the abstract language of music is the only direct way to the human heart. And in this modern world where emotions—particularly big emotions—are often considered inappropriate, inconvenient, even impolite, where the expression of full-bodied emotion has been “civilized” out of most of us, the extreme, unapologetic emotionalism of musical theatre offers audiences a much needed release. Only in musical theatre can those big emotions be adequately expressed. Of course, it’s this emotionalism that makes some people, inculcated with a fear of emotion, so uncomfortable. (1)

Lehman Engel echoes this sentiment in his text on writing for musical theater, Words With Music, as he contrasts the modern American stage, which is more focused on engaging the intellect, with the tenets of musical theater, a genre which is built around emotions: “Musical stage works, I would say categorically, cannot exist without feeling as the most basic element” (Words 79). The combining of words and music adds an intensity to the overall feeling of a musical, and thus, the use of music in musical theater is dependent on the presence of strong emotions. Whereas the postmodern works of the non-musical stage are often analytical and dispassionate, musical theater unrepentantly aims at the heart.
This idea of unreserved emotional catharsis is fundamental to Dickens’s prose style. Such emotion can be found in nearly all of Dickens’s texts, and the reality that he consistently moved his readers to tears seems to epitomize the overt emotionality that so defined his style of writing. *The Oxford Reader’s Companion to Dickens* mentions how “early in his career, Dickens was famous—later notorious—for his willingness to play on readers’ heartstrings” (Schlicke 524). Dickens was not simply trying to manipulate his readers, however—he too invested himself emotionally in the lives of his characters. The death of Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop* is infamously cited as an example of the worst elements of Dickens’s excessiveness, but Dickens himself was deeply moved by the situation which he had created; while writing these particular chapters, he refused all invitations to social engagements so as to concentrate wholly on the tragedy at hand (Davis *A to Z* 278). Clearly, the heightened emotionality of Dickens’s novels was more than an artistic tool—it was a fundamental element of the artist himself.

William F. Axton describes the importance of these emotional excesses to the author’s writing and concludes that such excesses are the result of a romanticized worldview coupled with a deep love of theatricality: “His general prose style is everywhere studded with superlatives and hyperbole. No doubt this tendency toward a loosely theatrical heightening and stylization has its source in Dickens’ exuberant vision of the world around him, but its counterpart in the playhouse ought to be noted in passing” (142). As mentioned, this element of Dickens’s prose has been a frequent source of criticism for the author’s writing style, and George J. Worth recounts how the term “melodramatic” has been thrown around casually in the evaluation of Dickens’s novels: “A good many of these critics have, somewhat irritably, reached for it as a handy all purpose weapon whenever they want to cudgel Dickens for
offenses he has, according to them, committed against the art of fiction or the canons of good
taste as they have understood them” (2). Worth’s reference to “good taste” here is fitting,
given that Aldous Huxley attacked Dickens’s writings as a primary example of what he
called “vulgarity” in literature; for Huxley, the fact that Dickens fully believed in the
emotions that he invested into his creations is no excuse for the bathos he sometimes
incorporated into his fictional worlds:

The case of Dickens is a strange one. The really monstrous emotional vulgarity, of
which he is guilty now and then in all his books and almost continuously in The Old
Curiosity Shop, is not the emotional vulgarity of one who stimulates feelings which he
does not have. It is evident, on the contrary, that Dickens felt most poignantly for and
with his Little Nell; that he wept over her sufferings, piously revered her goodness and
exulted in her joys. He had an overflowing heart; but the trouble was that it overflowed
with such curious and even rather repellant secretions. (54)

Huxley’s disparagement of Dickens is representative of the criticisms leveled against the
author by both the high realists and the modernists. Henry James, Virginia Woolf, and E.M.
Forster’s condemnation of the emotion inherent in Dickens’s novels has been well
documented. These authors, with their more reserved and cerebral approach to the novel,
may have elevated the genre into a higher art form, but these developments simultaneously
inhibited them from touching hearts in the way that Dickens did. Furthermore, if it is
difficult to imagine musical versions of plays written by the likes of Edward Albee and
Harold Pinter, then it is equally difficult to imagine musical adaptations of many of the
novels written by James, Woolf, and Forster.

The very qualities in Dickens that Huxley and others decry as excessive are the same
qualities which make him so suitable for musical adaptation. Huxley asserts that when
Dickens incorporates emotion into his novels, “his one and only desire on these occasions is
just to overflow, nothing else” (56). However, this overflow of emotions is analogous to the
points raised by Miller and Engel regarding the centrality of such emotions to the genre of the musical. The basic principle behind the cathartic effect of the presentation of large emotions through song in musical theater is similar to the catharses that Dickens creates in his novels through his emotionally unrestrained prose style. It is emotion that dictates the use and placement of music in a musical, for songs are most effective if they occur at emotional highpoints: “When the emotion becomes so large that speech isn’t enough, you sing” (Spencer 69). There are countless examples of this convention, and virtually every canonical musical from the golden age utilizes emotional climaxes as moments to incorporate music, song, and dance. In their text on writing for musical theater, Allen Cohen and Steven Rosenhaus stress the importance of “spotting” such highpoints in the libretto and transforming those highpoints into songs: “Good writers, consciously or not, follow the principle of musicalizing the emotional peaks of the story. If the story is at all suitable, there will be at least four or five such places” (69). Dickens’s appropriateness as a source for musical adaptation becomes all the more apparent when one considers just how many emotional peaks can be found in a single Dickensian novel. Whereas the process of “spotting” is difficult if the story being told is one that lacks emotional resonance, Dickens’s works seem automatically to lend themselves to such a process because the emotional climaxes in Dickens are so overt to begin with that having the characters shift from speaking to singing in a musical adaptation feels almost natural. The justification for the song is evident to the librettist from the strong emotion that the author himself has already incorporated into his narrative.

While Dickens relied on dialogue and narration to present heightened emotion in his novels, musicals utilize lyrics and melodies. Dickens’s use of prose in this regard is what has
led to his being labeled a melodramatic writer, despite the reality that most critics freely employ that term without a proper understanding of its meaning. Nevertheless, melodramatic speech, like song, is a means of communication used to convey heightened emotion. As Worth points out: “Melodramatic speech...rises well above the casualness of ordinary talk. Not just its diction but also the syntactic and figurative devices that are employed in it are literary rather than colloquial, showing evidence of greater learning and greater linguistic calculation than either the kind of characters who use it or the situations in which they find themselves seem to warrant” (16). Dickens was aware of the limitations of this means of expression, and the number of scenes in the Dickens canon which actually feature two preposterously articulate characters confronting one another with overly emotional monologues is fairly small. The numerous dead or dying children in the Dickens canon is frequently cited as evidence of the author’s melodramatic writing style, yet even these deathbed scenes show a surprising amount of restraint. Little Nell’s death occurs “offstage” and the most melodramatic elements of the scene are conveyed by the narrator. The deaths of Tiny Tim and Paul Dombey are handled similarly; though the narrator’s commentary again adds some sentimentality, there is no real conflict, which means that one of the hallmarks of melodrama is not present. One such sequence in Dickens which does feature a strong amount of confrontational hyperbole is Jo’s death scene in *Bleak House*, as Chapter XLVII ends with the unforgiving proclamation of the boy’s demise: “Dead! Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, right reverends and wrong reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us every day” (677). Once again, however, it is the narrator who injects the heightened emotions into the scene.
Clearly, the commentary of the narrator is often essential to the melodramatic elements of Dickens’s work. This use of the narrator to provide the intense emotionality that is associated with Boz’s writing style further underscores the suitability of Dickens for adaptation, as the narrative voice performs a similar function to the function of music in a musical. Axton assesses the analogous roles of narrative commentary in Dickens and orchestral accompaniment in melodrama in his text *Circle of Fire*:

The melodramatic voice is predominantly located in narrative, where its aim is to perform for the novel what the orchestra does for melodrama and reinforce mood, not only in individual scenes but across the whole extent of a narrative. Ultimately, the melodramatic voice seeks to achieve unity and coherence in atmosphere, feeling, and pace in the serial novel, whose mode of publication makes it especially difficult to unify….In achieving these ends, the melodramatic voice underlines those moral polarities in Dickens’ novels, which correspond to polarities in setting and character, by endowing each with its appropriate emotional quality suggested by rhythm. (221)

Axton’s insightful assessment can be taken even further if one focuses on the similar purposes of narrative commentary in Dickens and music in a musical (as opposed to music in a stage melodrama). As Axton points out, the melodramatic voice allows for coherence and unity of feeling. The music incorporated into a musical provides a similar sense of consistency, for although different characters may sing different melodies and utilize different styles of music, the fact is that they can all express themselves through song: music becomes an almost universal language, used most effectively for conveying emotion, in the same way that narrative commentary in Dickens, through the melodramatic voice of the narrator, becomes a universal means of conveying the emotional highs of the various scenes and situations.

Scott McMillin makes a similar assertion in *The Musical as Drama* when he compares the role of the orchestra in musical theater to the role of the omniscient narrator in the nineteenth-century British novel. Because a musical alternates between singing and
speaking, and no single character sings all of the songs, the one constant presence is the orchestra itself, which plays the music for each song, and, simultaneously, underscores each scene, thus conveying to the audience through music the emotions that are driving the scene. Most musicals begin with an overture: the orchestra’s “announcement of its authority” (McMillin 128). Perhaps most importantly, the orchestra can help to define and advance the story through the music it creates—sometimes there is action but no dialogue onstage, and the orchestra’s music helps to convey what is transpiring. It is the show’s equivalent of the melodramatic narrative commentary featured in Dickens, and, just as in Dickens, it occurs at points featuring the maximum emotion. One benefit to using music over spoken or written language, however, is that music can avoid the stereotypically exaggerated elements of melodrama. As Richard Andrews writes, “music can give you the space to make the most of a dramatic or emotional moment, to realize its full value in a way that, in mere dialogue, could seem overwritten” (22). Nevertheless, the suitability of Dickens’s novels as a source for musical adaptations only becomes more apparent as a result of these connections between the supposedly melodramatic elements of the author’s narrative technique and the use of music in musicals. In both cases, the device presents the overtly emotional elements of the art in a dynamic way so as to further convey the appropriate sentiments to either the reader or the audience member.

Dickens’s melodramatic tendencies may have contributed to the appeal of his novels as sources for musicals, but it is again necessary to recount that these tendencies have been a repeated source for criticisms of the author even in his own age. Dickens was frequently accused of exaggeration, but it is essential to remember that Dickens was a man with a keen talent for observation as well as an active imagination. The combined influence of these
traits is what allowed him to dwell upon “the romantic side of familiar things,” (*Bleak* 6) as he chronicled the essential elements of the world in which he lived while simultaneously recognizing that world’s potential for romance and fantasy. Dickens clearly believed that part of his role as author was to open his readers up to the romantic possibilities lurking beneath the surface of everyday life. Similarly, musicals have been described as many things, but the term “realistic” rarely comes to mind—real people do not burst into song. Nevertheless, just as in Dickens’s fiction, musicals convey a sense of increased sensitivity to the imaginative and romantic potential of the real world. In his text on creating stage musicals, Tom Jones states that the truly romantic concession of all musicals is that ordinary characters are able to take on new dimensions through song: “The music and the magic that lie locked inside our language are free to be released, and the words themselves can do more than just convey a character’s thoughts and emotions; they can help produce emotion on their own in exactly the same way that sounds and rhythms and melodies can produce emotion in music” (15). Rodgers and Hammerstein, the towering figures of modern musical theater, were repeatedly accused of the same sentimentality that Dickens’s critics so often decried. Interestingly, Hammerstein defended their art in Dickensian terms: “There’s nothing wrong with sentiment….The things people are sentimental about are the fundamental things in life. I don’t deny the ugly and the tragic—but somebody has to keep saying that life’s pretty wonderful too” (qtd. in Kislan 132). Like Dickens, Rodgers and Hammerstein were able to perceive the romantic potential in everyday life, and their attempts to reconcile the harsh and hopeful elements of life in their shows are evocative of Boz’s own approach to his art.

In keeping with the idea that the transition from spoken word to sung word in musical adaptations of Dickens’s novels feels natural given the heightened feelings presented in the
source material itself, it is important to remember that show-tunes are sung by characters, and, as stated above, Dickens’s characters are a principal component of his literary legacy. In order for a musical to come off successfully, the audience must accept the fact that the characters are capable of taking on the dimensions necessitated by the genre. That is, in order for the musical illusion to work, the audience must accept that these characters have the qualities necessary to justify their expressing themselves through song. The question of whether or not characters in a musical can ever be described as “realistic” is an interesting issue in the assessment of the genre, and obviously, the way one defines “realistic” will influence the answer to this question. However, if a person was to describe certain characters in musicals as realistic, he or she would likely have to do so by accepting their ability to sing rather than decrying this ability as nonsensical. The capability of a character to burst into song can be accepted if that character embodies the dynamic qualities necessitated by the medium itself.

In several instructional texts on how to write for musical theater, the authors stress the importance of vibrant characters that possess the larger-than-life qualities necessary to transition from speech to song. These qualities reflect the romantic tenets of musical theater, as new possibilities for thought, conversation, and expression are opened up to characters based on their abilities to utilize music. Jones describes characters in musicals as being “free to speak in a language that is more colorful and dynamic and full of nuance and variation than ordinary speech” (15) due to their not being constrained by the mundane qualities of everyday (“realistic”) individuals: thus, their ability to sing. David Spencer similarly stresses the importance of larger-than-life characters, for “musicalizing a story intensifies it. A passionate character on a quest fits naturally into an intense universe, a larger-than-life
character even more so. The character complements the intention (as well as the intensity) of the form” (29). Passive, quiet, or reflective characters would seem out of place on the musical stage. The wants, ambitions, goals, loves, and desires of passionate characters are what drive the plots in many of the most successful musicals of the twentieth century, and though characters like Curly McLain, Sky Masterson, Eliza Doolittle, Madame Rose, J. Pierpont Finch, Tevye, Dolly Levi, Sweeney Todd, Grizabella, and Jean Valjean are extremely diverse, they are all driven by specific goals. Furthermore, they all possess the romantic qualities necessary to justify their using music to express these goals.

Anyone who has read Dickens can undoubtedly appreciate the suitability of many of his characters for musical treatment. The “colorful” means of expression described by Jones is immediately evocative of the likes of Sam Weller, Mrs. Nickleby, Dick Swiveller, Sairey Gamp, Toots, Mr. Micawber, Josiah Bounderby, Mr. F’s Aunt, Joe Gargery, and countless other characters in the Dickens canon, and while these characters are not actually singers (save in the case of Swiveller), their unique ways of expressing themselves are like the particularized and passionate character-driven songs found in many classic Broadway shows. Both types of communication convey the romantic qualities of the individual’s personality.

In accordance with the idea of characterization in musical theater and Dickens’s compatibility with this tenet of the genre, it is important to note that although there are various character “types” in musicals, particularization is a key facet in the musical genre, as specific characters sing specific songs reflective of their specific personalities. Though all of the characters listed above have romantic qualities and intense passions, none of them will express themselves in exactly the same way, nor sing the exact same types of songs. Particularization of musical expression allows archetypical characters to rise above the
ordinary attributes of their character types. Eliza Doolittle is not just a Cockney pauper, Madame Rose is not just a stage mother, and Sweeney Todd is not just a vengeful madman; the ability to sing specific and meaningful songs about what it is that drives them is what separates them completely from the common herd of other characters in similar situations. Specificity regarding music and lyrics is therefore essential: “Much of musical character set-up depends not only on the quality and style of the music but even more especially on the lyrics through which the singing characters speak” (Engel Words 122). Vague lyrics and melodies that could be sung by just anyone are ineffective and do not befit the passionate and larger-than-life personalities of the musical stage. Furthermore, such songs would leave individual characters indistinguishable from the larger character types; their songs would simply be viewed as entertaining diversions as opposed to genuine means of self-expression.

Particularization regarding characters’ means of expression is a central element of Dickens’s prose style as well, for Boz’s characters transcend the common herd of individuals with similar personalities through their remarkable ways of expressing themselves. Vlock places significant emphasis on the vocal patterns that Dickens gives his characters based on their individual personalities and how the basic intonations and dialects of these characters would have been familiar to his readers through their knowledge of the larger character types:

Readers of Oliver Twist, for example, could assume, indeed were obliged to assume, that Fagin was not an Englishman but some other specimen altogether, with his slightly strange locutions, his occasional but not regular grammatical lapses, and his compulsive repetition of “my dear” in almost every sentence; that the Artful Dodger was what might be described as “English,” but a specimen of the lower sort, a speaker of street English; and that Mr. Brownlow was a gentleman, a speaker of standard English. They could translate the beadle’s self-importance into a largeness of gesture, a slowness of movement; in Fagin, as in David Copperfield’s slightly less offensive Uriah Heep, they might expect an oiliness, a creeping and sliding movement, a voice not distinguished or resonant. (Vlock’s emphases, 23)
Though the stereotype of the conniving and villainous stage-Jew or the low-class Cockney would have been familiar to many in the Victorian public as a result of the legacy of such characters in both novels and melodramas of the time, Dickens succeeds in manipulating such types to create more individualized and interesting characters. Two previously mentioned and noteworthy examples are Sam Weller and Dick Swiveller. Sam’s method of speaking is best remembered for the character’s use of “wellerisms,” ironic and humorous jokes which involve odd comparisons of some kind: “Business first, pleasure arterwards, as King Richard the Third said when he stabbed the t’other king in the Tower, afore he smothered the babbies” (339). Florence Baer writes that although Dickens did not invent this joke form, he shapes it so that it becomes a natural facet of Sam’s overall character—indeed, wellerisms prove an excellent instrument for Sam to use in his “education” of Mr. Pickwick in that they are “safe.” Sam ascribes a remark to another person in another context, thus relieving the speaker of any responsibility for what might possibly offend the listener (Baer 173). Sam’s wellerisms thus embody his sharpness and savvy, and prove useful tools in his efforts to get his master to face reality. Dick Swiveller is another character with a very distinctive means of expression, as Dick’s sentences are peppered with direct allusions to popular songs, rhymes, and ballads of the period. Upon learning that his former companion Sophia Wackles has married his hated rival Mr. Cheggs, Swiveller sadly reflects: “It has always been the same with me…always. `Twas ever thus—from childhood’s hour I’ve seen my fondest hopes decay, I never loved a tree or flower but `twas the first to fade away; I never nursed a dear Gazelle, to glad me with its soft black eye, but when it came to know me well, and love me, it was sure to marry a market-gardener” (414). Dick’s exaggerated reflections contain quotes from the lyrics to a popular love song from the period, and, as with
Sam’s jokes, these elements of his dialogue help to further define his character—Swiveller is an imprudent young wastrel, and his constant quoting of songs epitomizes his love of simple pleasures like alcohol and music. Both Sam and Dick are based on character types familiar to Victorian readers: the streetwise Cockney and the foppish, Regency-era squanderer were familiar figures in the literature and drama of the period. However, Dickens makes these characters distinctive from their forebears through his creative use of language. Just as individual characters in musicals are defined by their ability to sing distinctive melodies, so does Dickens use verbal expression for a means of particularizing his characters.

Vlock’s description of Dickens’s methods of characterization reveals another important element of the author’s technique. Throughout the Dickens canon, the inner lives of characters are presented in an extroverted way, either through physical gestures, sartorial choices, or some other externalized means of presentation. Whether it is Bumble’s unwavering focus on his parochial uniform, Jaggers’s obsessive washing of his hands, the constant twinkle in the eyes of Mr. Pickwick, or Uriah Heep’s writhing mannerisms, many of Dickens’s most memorable characters manifest their internal feelings through external traits.

This is another element of Dickens’s method of characterization that has been criticized by several of the author’s detractors, and the charge that Dickens’s characters possess no inner lives has been echoed by many critics throughout the years. Forster, one of several modernist writers who dismissed Dickens as an entertainer as opposed to an artist, wrote that “Dickens’ people are nearly all flat… .Nearly every one can be summed up in a sentence, and yet there is this wonderful feeling of human depth. Probably the immense vitality of Dickens

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2 Many critics tend to generalize on this subject, for there are several conscious, and indeed, overly self-conscious characters in the Dickens canon, particularly in Boz’s middle and later works. Key examples include Esther Summerson, Amy Dorrit, Arthur Clennam, and Pip. Carl Bandelin notes that “the central problem for the Dickens protagonist in general is to acquire the ability to live creatively and humanely in the world. This often requires the resolution of conflict between healthy self-awareness and inordinate self-consciousness” (22).
causes his characters to vibrate a little, so that they borrow his life and appear to lead one of their own. It is a conjuring trick” (71). As Harvey Sucksmith points out, however, ordinary people tend to give very little thought to their inner lives: “The true individual who is conscious of the richness of his inner life is a very rare and gifted exception” (45). Dickens lived during a time where the frantic pace of industrial society made silent contemplation and reflection somewhat impractical pastimes. Sucksmith also asserts that although most Dickensian characters spend very little time reflecting on their inner lives, this fact is sometimes illustrative of an unawareness on the part of the character: “Often Dickens represents the inner life of a character through the activity of the persona, a process which is not only psychologically accurate but typical of the way most people do express an inner life of which they are unconscious” (Sucksmith’s emphases, 46). Thus, physical habits become the outward manifestations of inner elements which the character has trouble acknowledging in a contemplative way. In other cases, extroverted character traits can be used as a defense mechanism. Mr. Micawber, one of Dickens’s greatest creations, is remembered for his comical grandiloquence rather than any sort of psychological profundity. Nevertheless, Micawber is aware of his own rhetorical powers, which seems to indicate that his externalized traits reveal hidden psychological insights; as William Hall astutely notes, “his ‘rhetoric’ is one of the means by which he attempts to preserve his ‘original form’ against the inner and outer forces (of which he is clearly aware) which threaten to crush that form out of existence” (246). Though many critics have trouble accepting the idea that Dickens’s characters possess anything more than surface-depth, the fact that the author uses externalized traits to convey the workings of his characters’ minds does not mean that their inner lives are nonexistent.
Musicals contain a similarly extroverted presentation of the inner lives of characters, though instead of relying on gesture and description, such characterization is accomplished through music and song. The ostentation and flashiness of many shows seems to discount the idea that a character in a musical could ever be described as possessing an “inner life.” That same ostentation can be used to help reveal facets of these characters’ inner lives, however; sung solos allow characters to ponder their existences in a way that simultaneously engages the audience. As Aaraon Frankel writes in his book on musical theater, a character in a musical sings a solo song “not to retreat into himself but to reconnect with the world around him” (31). Frankel cites several excellent examples such as Billy’s “Soliloquy” in Carousel, and “Rose’s Turn” in Gypsy. Both of these songs reveal the inner struggles of the character to the audience. As Frankel puts it, musical characters “turn in to turn out” (31), as the reflective solo numbers they sing about their thoughts and feelings convey facets of their personas. As is the case in Dickens’s novels, internalized elements of the individual are presented in an extroverted way.

One final link between characterization in Dickens and characterization in musicals relates to the issue of time. Stephen Citron states that “musicals don’t have room in their books to allow chit-chat” (134). Since so much time in a musical must be devoted to music and song, there is less time for character development that is not directly connected to the music itself. Therefore, characters must be introduced early; furthermore, the audience must have a firm understanding of these characters from the very beginning. Frankel asserts that, “in contrast to the gradual character disclosure of realistic theater, referred to as ‘onion-peeling,’ character development in musical theatre might be called, to coin a word, ‘beanstalk-springing.’” In the former, character is dense: packed, detailed in grays, colors to come. In
the latter, character is sharp: line-drawing contoured, in color to start” (31). Engel reaffirms this sentiment and outlines similar contrasts between modern straight theater and musical theater:

The characters in play and musical are introduced quite differently. In the musical, they appear at or near the beginning, are defined specifically as the principals, and simultaneously, a schism arises between them, while the audience is made to want to see it removed or resolved. In a play, the principals are not often introduced at once and are very often not defined in the beginning as principals. Often their true identity is not revealed until the very end, and in the case of a play by an author such as Harold Pinter, not even with the final curtain are we certain about the who, the what, and the why of the characters….Role is clear but not identity. (Words 17-18)

When a character is introduced in a musical, the audience is almost immediately aware of who this person is and what he or she wants. Whereas the heroes and heroines of playwrights like Pinter and Albee are difficult to understand and retain this inscrutability through to the end of the play, characters in musicals are usually clear-cut. Interestingly, the depiction of characters in musicals has repeatedly been linked to the characterization of Shakespeare’s heroes. Frankel makes this comparison in his text, pointing out that in both cases, “all characters appear clear and full-blown on sight. On first entrance, Sir John is immediately Falstaff, Harry Percy is Hotspur, Katherine is Kate, however more they will develop. So is Harold Hill the music man, Joey pal Joey, Charity sweet Charity, right away” (31). Though these comparisons to Shakespeare are valuable, Dickens would be an equally effective example for the author to utilize.

The links between characterization in Shakespearean drama and characterization in musicals provides an interesting framework for introducing Dickens into the discussion, for the influence of Shakespeare on Dickens’s writings has been explored by several writers.\(^3\) J.B. Van Amerongen traces these links in \textit{The Actor in Dickens}, commenting on the similar

\(^3\) See Alfred B. Harbage’s \textit{A Kind of Power: The Shakespeare-Dickens Analogy} (1975) and Valerie Gager’s \textit{Dickens and Shakespeare: The Dynamics of Influence} (1996).
celebrations of certain low-class characters in the works of the two writers, as well as the analogous depictions of good and evil (220-223). Both authors drew on other sources for their inspiration, but, through their own memorable approaches to characterization, succeeded in making the ordinary extraordinary: “Just as Shakespeare was content to use a dry chronicle or a worthless forgotten play as the plot for his immortal comedies and tragedies, Dickens transmogrified Pierce Egan, and features derived from farce and melodrama, into his masterly pictures of the time and into highly original character-portraits” (Amerongen 222). Much like Shakespeare’s leading characters, Dickens’s characters, particularly the individuals who populate the worlds of his early novels, are instantly recognizable. The goodness of characters like Samuel Pickwick, Oliver Twist, Nicholas Nickleby, and Little Nell is detectable immediately, while the malevolence of Fagin, Wackford Squeers, and Daniel Quilp is equally conspicuous.

The plainness and comprehensibility of Dickens’s characters is yet another element of his writing which has been criticized since his novels were first published. Anthony Trollope famously mocked the apparent lack of complexity in Dickens’s characterization methods in a passage from The Warden: “Mr. Sentiment is certainly a very powerful man, and perhaps not the less so that his good poor people are so very good; his hard rich people so very hard; and the genuinely honest so very honest” (180). Nevertheless, the instant familiarity of Dickens’s characters is yet another indication of their inherent suitability for the musical genre. The inscrutability of other literary characters would be difficult to translate into the genre given the nature of this particular form of entertainment. While music might be used to allow such characters to sing about their feelings, a series of musical soliloquies would quickly wear thin. This might account in part for the failure of the recent adaptation of Jane
Jane is a popular and complex literary heroine, but she lacks the qualities necessary to make her a believable musical heroine. The character’s introspectiveness and enigmatic qualities are perfectly suitable for the novel genre, but do not translate well into the medium of the musical. Conversely, the most popular Dickensian musical adaptation of all time is built around a character who is at once recognizable, sympathetic, and fundamentally uncomplicated. Lionel Bart astutely begins his masterpiece *Oliver!* with the immortal scene of Oliver Twist asking for more gruel. Oliver’s vulnerability, desire for love, and inherent goodness are all perceptible qualities, and audience members, like novel readers, can immediately understand the protagonist. Whereas characters from novels by other canonical authors are usually dense and introverted, Dickens’s characters, with their theatrical personalities, recognizable qualities, and larger-than-life means of expressing themselves, embody the tenets of the musical stage.

A somewhat more complicated factor that reinforces Dickens’s suitability for musical adaptation relates to the subject of plot. Although Boz’s novels are notoriously long, the serialization technique Dickens used when publishing his novels means that all of his works are, to a certain extent, episodic. Each monthly number that Dickens published contained a group of chapters constituting one particular episode in the overall plot. Consequently, Dickens’s novels have proven a good source for musical adaptation because specific episodes in each novel, even in the more rigidly structured texts, are more memorable than others; therefore, it is not difficult to select certain plots and subplots from Dickens’s novels and build adaptations around those particular elements. In Marek Golebiowski’s *Being Alive,* the

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4 Caird’s *Jane Eyre* closed after 209 performances. David Spencer claims that the source material was ill-suited for musical treatment due to Jane’s personality: “*Jane Eyre* was destined to fail no matter how well it might have been executed, because the title character does not drive the story….Her inner life may be one of turbulence, but as long as she avoids taking matters into her own hands, she exists in a state of suspended animation” (30).
author analyzes the musical adaptation of Voltaire’s *Candide* and asserts that “the episodic structure [of the novel] seemingly favors the process of the adaptation for stage since it offers the ready-made units for dramatization and musicalization” (151). The episodic structure of Dickens’s novels allows for a similarly straightforward adaptation process: Bart judiciously selected which elements of *Oliver Twist* to incorporate into *Oliver!*, while Rupert Holmes used an assortment of episodes from *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* for his *Drood* (1985).

Though the structures of these two musicals vary greatly, both shows make use of the fact that, when adapting Dickens, one may eliminate certain elements from his texts without weakening the central idea.

One final component to consider regarding Dickens’s suitability for musical adaptation is the centrality of the audience in musical theater. Gottfried places tremendous emphasis on the almost participatory nature of musical theater: while an audience will leave a straight play talking about performances, scenes, or bits of dialogue, the audience for a good musical might leave singing, whistling, or humming bits of the score, thus becoming participants in the musical itself. As Gottfried asserts, after experiencing a good show an audience has undoubtedly been affected: “They sing and dance as they make their way up the aisles while the walkout music is being played. They are not out of the theater yet. The music goes on, and as it goes on they take the show with them. Not yet out of the theater, they are still wearing the show on their faces. On the sidewalk they are different from other people. They’re fresh from peaking, not quite back to real life” (343). Though people who criticize musicals sometimes complain about the fact that the purpose of a musical is simply to entertain an audience, the centrality of the audience to a musical arguably makes the art form more impressive than traditional theater, for the audience is more demanding. Andrews
points out that the audience for a musical will feel cheated if their expectations are not fulfilled: “You don’t have to have a happy ending, but you must have a satisfactory one; in the musical version, Godot must arrive” (38). The unrepentant purpose of a musical is to entertain in a way that no other art form can: most straight plays do not use songs, and most operas do not use dialogue. The musical is the perfect amalgam.

If the purpose of a Broadway musical is to entertain and elicit a response from an audience, Dickens’s writing style is similarly rhetorical. The foundations of both mediums are dependent on creating some sort of emotional connection with the reader or viewer. As stated, Dickens was not a passive writer; rather, he desired to actively engage his audience. Boz did all he could to ensure that his audience would be pleased with his creative efforts, and his reading tours finally granted him the ability to receive the instantaneous feedback of a performer. Given how focused he was on his audience, it is obvious that one of Dickens’s central criteria for evaluating his own novels was their popularity. As Sucksmith notes, “the immense popularity of Dickens’ novels, which always delighted him, was one standard by which he judged their success….Yet this standard of judging by popularity cannot be explained simply in terms of finance or personal vanity. It is a case rather of a sincere and intimate bond with the reader” (22). The theatricality of Dickens’s novels becomes even more understandable when one considers the author’s desire for an intimate relationship with the reading public.

Dickens’s approach to his art has unmistakable links with the tenets of the musical genre, and it is clear why his novels have proven such popular sources for adaptation in spite of the fact that novels have not traditionally been employed by writers of musicals in such a capacity. At least one modern musical adaptation exists for each of the following novels:
The Pickwick Papers, Oliver Twist, Nicholas Nickleby, The Old Curiosity Shop, A Christmas Carol, David Copperfield, Hard Times, A Tale of Two Cities, Great Expectations, and The Mystery of Edwin Drood. While the sheer abundance of Dickensian musicals is striking, the variety of these adaptations is even more remarkable. Novels by Dickens have served as the inspiration for many different types of shows, and several Dickensian musical adaptations reflect various trends in theater during specific periods in the history of the genre: Oliver!, a book show, was written during the golden age of the American musical; Smike, a pop musical adaptation of Nicholas Nickleby, was written in the wake of Andrew Lloyd Webber’s early “rock musicals,” most notably, Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat; and the highly experimental Drood was written in the innovative era of the concept show.

In 1960, Oliver! marked the birth of the modern Dickensian musical, and simultaneously, the start of an exciting new phase in the history of British musical theater. Today, Oliver! not only remains one of the best loved British shows of all time, but also, the archetypal Dickens musical, for Lionel Bart successfully explored the harmonious potential in the author’s prose style, as outlined above. Nearly all of the Dickens-inspired musicals produced in the years following Oliver! were influenced in some way by Bart’s masterpiece, and it was the composer’s exploration of all the critical issues regarding the suitability of Dickens as a source for stage adaptations that allowed for the emergence of the Dickensian musicals that followed. Bart captured the romantic qualities of the author’s writing style through his use of music to tell the story, explored the musical personalities of the original characters, and utilized the climaxes of the original novel to dictate the placement of songs. As a result of the composer’s efforts, many Dickensian adaptations would follow.
The fact that Dickens’s writing style translates well to the form of the stage and film musical reveals that the melodic qualities of Dickens’s words transcend the difficulties posed by adapting a novel into a musical. Nevertheless, this suitability of Dickens for the musical genre, and the subsequent adaptation of his novels into stage and film musicals, raises several questions that go beyond the topics of genre and form. In spite of all of the elements of Dickens’s prose style that make his works conducive to the genre, there are elements within his novels that are decidedly unmusical; several producers passed on Oliver! after being approached with the concept for the musical simply because they viewed the original subject matter as inherently unsuitable for the musical stage. Oliver Twist paints a bleak portrait of Victorian England, and Dickens’s brutal satire of the workhouse system, along with his dark depiction of the criminal underworld as represented by Fagin and Sikes, seems an unlikely source for a cheery musical featuring songs and dances. The cohesive, utopian vision that is so essential to most successful musicals is nowhere to be found in the original text of Oliver Twist, unless one turns to the staid and monotonous world of the middle-class characters.

In many cases, musical adaptation necessitates simplification and sentimentalization. Oliver! was clearly written for family audiences, and though Dickens’s novel can certainly be appreciated by a wide variety of readers, its darker elements and unflinching satire are far more adult than anything that is featured in Bart’s adaptation. The harsher components of Dickens’s world are tamed by the composer, and the overall story is simplified so as to make the subject matter more appealing to a family audience. In a sense, Bart was “Disneyfying” Dickens. The oversimplification of Boz’s novels, coupled with the tendency of some adaptors to lay emphasis solely on the joyous elements of the author’s texts, frequently
leaves audiences with a limited understanding of the artist and his works. Dickens was much more than cheery hearths and Christmas celebrations, but in adaptations such as *Oliver!*, there is a tendency to lay especial emphasis on these elements so as to appeal to a family-based audience.

The issue of narrative is also important in this context, particularly in the case of *Oliver!* Dickens’s narrator in *Oliver Twist* is one of his most vocal, comical, and omnipresent storytellers; his gregariousness and abrasiveness make him a memorable “character,” and yet, translating him into a stage or screen version of *Oliver Twist* would seem impossible, particularly in light of his anonymous identity. Like any adaptor of *Oliver Twist*, Bart must work around the narrative difficulties presented by the distinctions between a novel and a live-action medium, but in the case of a Dickensian adaptation, the process usually becomes even more difficult given how important the voice of the storyteller is to the story itself.

While the emotion that Dickens’s narrators inject into his narratives is an important element in the musicality of Boz’s prose, given how dependent musicals are on emotional highpoints, this issue is complicated by the fact that Dickens’s narrators are almost always large as life, not only in their emotionality and verbosity, but also, in their basic personalities. It is perhaps for this reason that Dickens, the man, continues to fascinate people: it sometimes seems as though the voices of these storytellers are indistinguishable from the voice of the author himself. Indeed, the fact that Dickens engaged in reading tours in which he actually stepped into the role of the narrator suggests the strong connection between the author and the voices he created to help tell his stories. Given that the conventions of musical theater are not particularly conducive to the presence of a narrator, the composers and librettists who have adapted Dickens for the musical stage and screen had to find ways of preserving the
Dickensian spirit of the narrative while working around the conventions of the narrative voice that so defined this same spirit.

One must also consider the issue of history, for the musical adaptations of Dickens’s novels produced over the last fifty years are part of a complex stage tradition that began as early as 1837. *Oliver Twist* was adapted for the theater countless times in Dickens’s own era, and several adaptations appeared before the author had even finished serializing the story. Bart was thus building on a long and rich history of *Oliver Twist* on stage and screen when he first began work on *Oliver!* in 1958. *Twist* remains one of Dickens’s most remembered works due largely to its afterlife in various media, and our cultural memory of this novel varies considerably from what is contained in the text itself. Juliet John notes that *Oliver Twist* “has become, in Paul Davis’ phrase, a ‘culture text,’” (1), borrowing the term that Davis coined to characterize *A Christmas Carol*. Like the *Carol, Twist* has ingrained itself in our cultural consciousness, but this culture text is a highly selective version of the original novel. Given the popularity of Bart’s adaptation, it is unsurprising that many people’s memories of Oliver’s story come from Bart’s musical as opposed to Dickens’s novel, and the history of *Oliver Twist* in popular culture has now been irrevocably shaped by *Oliver!* Other historical issues concern the genre of the musical itself in relation to Dickens, for although *Oliver!* was the first modern book musical based on a Dickens novel, there is a long history of Dickensian stage adaptations which feature music. *Oliver!* thus represents an important moment in the historical evolution of Dickensian stage music.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there is the issue of culture. The defining characteristics of Dickens’s writing style make him more adaptable to the genre than most other canonical authors, but it is arguable that Boz’s central trait, his Englishness, sets him in
opposition to this form of entertainment. Indeed, many of the most important topics regarding the history of the Dickensian musical relate to the issue of cultural traditions; the modern musical, as an entertainment genre, has long been regarded as quintessentially American, while Dickens, who so thoroughly defined the Victorian era in his novels and who is widely identified with English literary and social history, is quintessentially British. The transatlantic appeal of Dickens, even in his own age, has been documented in detail and it is not surprising that American librettists and composers, along with their British counterparts, have been drawn to Dickens as a source, particularly in light of the musical qualities in his novels. It does not matter, however, whether an American or British composer is adapting Dickens for the musical stage and screen, for whatever the cultural background of the team behind the adaptation, the adaptation process involves the amalgamation of two different traditions. Of all the great English novelists, Dickens is perhaps the most overtly British, while the modern musical is one of the few indigenous American art forms. The British are protective of Dickens as an English institution, while Americans are protective of the musical as an American institution. Thus, for all of his musical qualities, Dickens presents a unique cultural quandary when one considers the possibility of adapting him to fit this American art form.

This quandary did little to stop Lionel Bart, who brilliantly overcame the disparity through his own familiarity with the traditions of British music. In spite of some personal reservations about British musicals, Denny Martin Flinn heaps a great deal of praise upon Bart’s Oliver! in his text, Musical!: A Grand Tour. Flinn claims that a proper musical version of a Dickens novel could only have been produced in England by an English composer like Bart: “England made the best Dickens films, and their theater still bears the
marks of the great Elizabethan dramas, which dealt with stories of great size and scope” (327). Bart wrote *Oliver!* in the golden age of the American musical, and the show clearly employs the integrated format that defined the American style of musical theater.

Nevertheless, Bart structures his adaptation in a way so that the British subject matter translates well into the American medium, and the composer is able to successfully preserve the distinctly English qualities of the author while operating in the American genre of the integrated book show. It is thus unsurprising that *Oliver!* proved to be such a hit in both the United Kingdom and the United States. Consequently, *Oliver!* must stand as the cornerstone of any analysis of musical adaptations of Dickens.

These subjects—audience, narrative, history, and cultural context—can provide frameworks along which to analyze musical versions of Dickens’s works. This project will explore the legacy of Dickens in the genre of the musical, focusing specifically on the musicality of the author’s works, the historical evolution of the Dickensian musical, the intended audience for these shows and films, the presentation of narrative through song, and the cultural negotiations that must take place when adapting the author for the musical genre. Section I is broken down into four individual chapters which focus exclusively on *Oliver!*, the quintessential Dickensian musical. This section details the history of Bart’s adaptation while addressing all of the issues listed above. The composer made several innovative choices in his approach to the source, and he successfully overcame many of the problems inherent in converting a novel into a musical. Bart’s skillful negotiation of the different cultural traditions in which he was working, the modifications made to give the story a more family-friendly tone, the difficulties raised by the narrative voice in Dickens’s text, and the
place of his adaptation in the larger historical context of stage and film versions of *Twist* are all treated in this section.

The subsequent chapters explore each one of these framing issues in greater detail, expanding the analysis first presented in the *Oliver!* section by applying it to other Dickensian musicals. Chapter 5 addresses the historical issues involved in discussing the Dickensian musical by presenting a broad chronological view of the evolution of adaptations of the author’s works. Historical comparisons will be made between three different musical versions of novels by Dickens: W.T. Moncrieff’s *Sam Weller, or The Pickwickians* (1838), Cyril Ornadel and Leslie Bricusse’s *Pickwick* (1963), and Rupert Holmes’s *Drood* (1985). Each one of these shows epitomizes a separate phase in the progression of musical adaptations of Dickens. Ultimately, tracing the chronology of these three shows reveals that the Dickensian musical cannot be pigeonholed into a specific genre. Rather, different historical periods have witnessed the production of diverse adaptations based on the stage conventions of that particular era.

Chapter 6 takes up the audience issue by exploring what Michael Pointer calls the “jollification” of Dickens in musical adaptations of the author’s works. Several critics have decried *Oliver!* for its taming of Fagin and its elimination of Dickens’s social satire. The fact that the darker elements of Dickens’s writing are often ignored in musical adaptations of the author’s works in attempts to make these adaptations more suitable for younger audiences warrants closer scrutiny, since such adaptations often divert young viewers from the source material. Chapter 6 focuses on a film musical adaptation of Dickens’s fourth novel, *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Initially released under the title *Mr. Quilp* (1975), Anthony Newley’s version of *Curiosity Shop* is an obvious attempt to duplicate the success of *Oliver!*. Newley
tries to turn Quilp into a loveable rascal in a clear effort to replicate Bart’s revisions of Fagin. However, Newley is never able to reconcile his own lighthearted approach to the character with the darker elements of Dickens’s original story.

Chapter 7 addresses narrative issues, as one of Dickens’s most memorable qualities, his narrative voice, is difficult to adapt to the musical stage. Though Dickens wrote primarily in the third-person omniscient voice, two of his best-loved works, *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*, were written in the first person. Chapter 7 reveals the difficulties of setting Boz’s two first-person novels to music, and the problems involved in translating the narrative voices of the protagonists to the musical genre, which may account for the lack of popular success of these particular adaptations: Joel Hirschhorn and Al Kasha’s *Copperfield* ran for just thirteen performances on Broadway in 1981, while Cyril Ornadel’s 1975 musical version of *Great Expectations* never even reached Broadway. Ultimately, the traditional musical format proves largely incompatible with the first person narratives that provide the nucleus of Dickens’s bildungsromans.

Finally, Chapter 8 addresses what is perhaps the most important element in the Dickensian musical debate, the cultural issue. Here, the boundaries between the American book show and the British mega-musical are explored in depth by comparing two successful but structurally different adaptations of Dickens’s most popular work: *A Christmas Carol*. Leslie Bricusse’s *Scrooge* (1970) and Alan Menken’s *A Christmas Carol: The Musical* (1994) are, in some ways, reverse images of one another: Bricusse’s adaptation is written in the form of a traditional American book musical despite the fact that the composer is British, while Menken’s adaptation is written in the form of a mega-musical (a form made famous by British composer Andrew Lloyd Webber) despite the fact that Menken is an American.
These structural differences create larger textual differences between the two adaptations, and both musicals ultimately contribute to what Davis calls the “culture text” of *A Christmas Carol* by accentuating different facets of Dickens’s original text along cultural lines—lines represented by the composers’ divergent approaches to the songs and music.
In a piece entitled “One of the Worldwide Family” that was published in the beautiful souvenir brochure produced for the 1994 Palladium Theatre revival of *Oliver!* (1960), Lionel Bart claimed that when he set about adapting *Oliver Twist* into a musical, his primary focus was on the downtrodden protagonist’s quest to find love. It was a quest which Bart felt to be both universal and transcendent: “The song ‘Where is Love?’ became the musical center of the piece and the premise of the whole thing” (par. 3). It is somewhat ironic that Oliver’s main ballad in this musical adaptation of Dickens’s second novel repeatedly puts forth the question of “where is love?” given the fact that *Oliver!* remains one of the most beloved British musicals of all time. Indeed, there seems to have been no shortage of love for *Oliver!* over the years. The show and its film adaptation have won countless prestigious awards. The play has been successfully revived onstage many times, and has opened in such diverse locations as Tel Aviv, Oslo, Tokyo, and Johannesburg. The musical has even proven popular enough to warrant its own reality show: a talent competition entitled *I’d Do Anything* which ran on BBC One throughout the month of May in the year 2008. This series was the latest in a string of successful BBC reality competitions built around the premise of finding an unknown to play the lead in a big-budget revival of a classic musical. The stakes for the competition were high as the contestants were vying for the coveted roles of Oliver Twist and Nancy in the upcoming revival of *Oliver!* , which is set to premiere at Lord Andrew Lloyd Webber’s Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. Though Dickens created many adventures for
young Oliver in the novel that bears his name, the journey from literary hero to reality television star is perhaps even more fascinating than anything the inimitable Boz could have conjured up for his titular character. Truly, the fact that Oliver! has spawned a nationally broadcast British talent show bears further testament to the popularity and enduring charm of Bart’s musical adaptation.

Oliver! is more than just a popular musical, however. Oliver! is arguably the most popular version of Oliver Twist ever created—no small achievement given the multitude of stage and screen versions of the novel produced over the course of its existence. The familiarity that many people have with the story of little Oliver is often due in large part to their familiarity with Bart’s infinitely hummable musical score. Without a doubt, the adaptation has helped to define our cultural understanding of Oliver Twist.

Furthermore, though Oliver! was not the first musical version of a Dickens novel ever created, it remains the most well-known and successful Dickensian adaptation to fall into this particular entertainment genre. Undoubtedly, the success of Oliver! inspired many of the Dickensian musicals that followed. The 1960s and 70s in particular saw a wave of musical adaptations of Dickens’s novels that tried to duplicate the success of Oliver! Through his own creativity, vision, and indisputable talent for writing memorable songs, Lionel Bart succeeded in focusing the attention of many composers, librettists, and lyricists on the modern musical potential of Dickens’s novels—a potential which, up until that point, had remained largely untapped.

The following chapters detail the conception and development of Oliver! while simultaneously addressing such critical issues as the contexts in which the musical was created, the traditions from which it emerged, and the marks that it left on our cultural
understanding of *Oliver Twist*. Chapter 1 reveals the cultural boundaries which Bart was forced to negotiate in creating an American-style musical based on a British source, while simultaneously examining the two disparate historical traditions which contributed to the gestation of *Oliver!*: the history of *Oliver Twist* on stage and screen, and the history of the British musical.

Chapter 2 focuses more specifically on the development of *Oliver!*, tracing the early songwriting career of Lionel Bart and his subsequent successes in the realms of pop music and British musical theater. The perils and pleasures of the buildup toward the initial production of *Oliver!* are chronicled, as is the phenomenal response to the show in England following its West End debut. Chapter 2 also addresses the overarching cultural issues that shaped Bart’s approach to the adaptation process and his successful negotiation of the cultural boundaries between the British source and the American musical format.

Chapter 3 presents a reading of the original version of *Oliver!* based on the script, score, and promptbook to the 1960 West End production. Specific attention is given to Bart’s reinvention of Dickens’s dark and satirical vision of the story of Oliver, his use of music-hall songs to help preserve the Englishness of his source, and his notably positive depiction of the thieves’ den, a depiction which stands in contrast to the more staid and quiet portrayal of the middle-class characters. Consideration is likewise given to Bart’s re-imagining of Fagin as a loveable, roguish co-protagonist, quite possibly the most important alteration that the composer made to his source. The results are striking, not only in terms of the musical itself, but likewise, in terms of our cultural understanding of the character of Fagin.

Finally, Chapter 4 continues to trace the history of the show. This chapter focuses on the celebrated film adaptation of the musical produced in 1968 and examines the creative
decisions made by Carol Reed in his attempt to translate *Oliver!* from stage to screen.

Furthermore, this chapter details various issues regarding the “Disneyfication” of *Oliver Twist*, as the family film that Reed directed exerted an even more pronounced effect on the culture text of *Twist* than the original stage play. To conclude this section, Chapter 4 chronicles the recent revivals of *Oliver!*, including the all-important 1994 West End revival staged at the Palladium Theatre under the supervision of Cameron Mackintosh.

Understanding the history and legacy of *Oliver!* is essential to understanding the evolution of the Dickensian musical and the subsequent critical issues associated with this form of entertainment, as Lionel Bart was the first composer to successfully address all of the inherent difficulties involved in creating a modern musical version of a Dickens novel. Had it not been for the original success of *Oliver!*, it is doubtful that shows like *Pickwick* (1963) or films like *Scrooge* (1970) would ever have been conceived or produced. It is a testament to the enduring popularity of Dickens, and simultaneously, to the genius of Lionel Bart, that *Oliver!* succeeded in leaving audiences with a sentiment evocative of the titular hero in regard to Dickensian musicals: “Please, sir, I want some more.”
Chapter 1
“Consider yourself at home” – The Cultural Contexts Framing Oliver!

Lionel Bart is undoubtedly the father of the modern Dickensian musical, though playing parent to such an unruly child was no easy task. In creating Oliver! (1960), Bart had to negotiate the boundaries between different countries, cultures, and traditions, specifically, the boundaries between the Englishness of Dickens and the American spirit of the modern musical. Before addressing the gestation of Oliver!, an understanding of the divergences between these cultural contexts is necessary.

It seems almost redundant to discuss the Englishness of Dickens, for even in his own time, Boz was viewed as inherently English in his style, form, and content. In the Oxford Reader’s Companion to Dickens, Paul Schlicke catalogues the responses to Dickens’s writings by some of his contemporary reviewers. A critic at the Quarterly Review claimed that “Boz is a true national author—English to the backbone” (qtd. in Schlicke 223). While praising The Pickwick Papers, Thomas Hood described Dickens as “thoroughly English” with a keen awareness and understanding of the British character (qtd. in Schlicke 223). Malcolm Andrews discusses this correlation between Dickens and British national identity extensively in Dickens on England and the English:

In his own day Dickens was recognized as a master of the knowledge of English life: “he is so thoroughly English, and is now part and parcel of that mighty aggregate of national fame which we feel bound to defend on all points against attack.” This review appeared in 1850, soon after David Copperfield had come to an end, when Dickens was on the crest of his career. Even a century and a quarter later, it is hard to think of any other English writer whose imaginative world remains so fully assimilated into the national identity. There may be finer novelists, greater masters of their craft, but few if any, whose books yield such an abundance of particularized national life. (xvi)
The very fact that the phrase “Dickensian London” exists seems to exemplify the connection between the author and English culture. Because Dickens was one of the first novelists to explore the setting of post-industrial, urban London in his fiction, it is no surprise that the concept of his London remains a substantial part of the author’s reputation. Though Dickens’s novels are not entirely confined to London, or England itself for that matter, he is remembered as a distinctly English author: “Dickens wrote very little that was not to do with England and the English” (Andrews xiv). The connections between the author and the culture of his country are transcendent: when one thinks of Dickens, thoughts of England are never far behind.

It is, of course, somewhat ironic to assess Dickens from this standpoint given the fact that his fiction abounds in criticisms of the English and British society as a whole. From the condemnation of the workhouse system in *Oliver Twist*, through his satire of bureaucratic incompetence in *Little Dorrit*, Dickens pulls few punches in his depiction of what he perceives to be the country’s flaws. Despite these stinging criticisms of England in his fiction, Dickens became one of the most beloved cultural figures in British history. George Orwell famously commented on this paradox: “Dickens attacked English institutions with a ferocity that has never since been approached. Yet he managed to do it without making himself hated, and, more than this, the very people he attacked have swallowed him so completely that he has become a national institution himself” (3). The diverse subject matter covered in Dickens’s novels has undoubtedly contributed to this irony, for between his criticism of political institutions and his celebration of domesticity, Dickens appeals to both liberal and conservative tastes alike. However, whether one remembers Dickens for his
angry censure of the Victorian government, or for his joyful celebration of the British hearth, England remains at the forefront of his legacy.

Dickens was well aware of his own Englishness, and, despite his criticism of the problems that existed in Victorian society, he took pride in being an Englishman. Guests from other countries likewise perceived him as conspicuously English. Schlicke writes that “[Dickens] struck visitors as very English in manner” (Oxford 225) and documents how various foreigners perceived his Englishness as one of the essential facets of his personality and demeanor. In an article entitled “The Sunday Screw,” which appeared in Household Words in 1850, Dickens reveals his great affection for the domestic virtues of the English populace:

The English people have long been remarkable for their domestic habits, and their household virtues and affections. They are, now, beginning to be universally respected by intelligent foreigners who visit this country for their good-humour, and their cheerful recognition of all restraints that really originate in consideration for the general good. They deserve this testimony (Which we have often heard, of late, with pride) most honourably. Long maligned and mistrusted, they proved their case from the very first moment of having it in their power to do so; and have never, on any single occasion within our knowledge, abused any public confidence that has been reposed in them….The national vices are surprisingly few. The people in general are not gluttons, nor drunkards, nor gamblers, nor addicted to cruel sports, nor to the pushing of any amusement to furious and wild extremes. They are moderate and easily pleased, and very sensible to all affectionate influences. Any knot of holiday-makers, without a large proportion of women and children among them, would be a perfect phenomenon. Let us go into any place of Sunday enjoyment where any fair representation of the people resort and we shall find them decent, orderly, quiet, sociable, among their families and neighbors. (289-292)

In spite of his numerous complaints against the complacency of his countrymen, Dickens clearly had a great regard for English virtues. Furthermore, many elements of British culture and cultural traditions are celebrated in Dickens’s novels; the wide variety of characters and situations in Boz’s stories allows for a broad, panoramic view of the best (and worst) elements in Victorian society. This panorama emerges in Dickens’s very first novel and continues on throughout the canon. From early on in The Pickwick Papers, the author
establishes a nostalgic affection for the rural tradition represented by Mr. Wardle and his manor at Dingley Dell, while just a few chapters later, the introduction of the uproarious Sam Weller marks an appreciation of the bold, streetwise, Cockney spirit which emerged in urban London. Even the darker novels of his later period, most remembered for their dismal portrayal of British society, contain celebratory elements, specifically, in their depiction of English domestic virtues. *Bleak House* is made less bleak by the presence of Esther Summerson and Allan Woodcourt, who eventually marry and create a loving domestic environment; the hard times in *Hard Times* are eased by Sissy Jupe and Rachael, both of whom succeed in redeeming other characters through their representation of tranquility and charity; and Little Dorrit earns her role as title character of Dickens’s darkest novel by rejecting the chance to be rich for the sake of creating a more happy and productive life for herself and Arthur Clennam. Thus, Dickens’s celebration of Englishness is apparent even when he is condemning the English government and general populace for the vices of the age. In his text on the representation of British national identity on film, Jeffrey Richards reaffirms that Dickens’s celebration of the virtues of the Victorian era, along with his ability to meticulously define Englishness through his novels, has contributed to our understanding of Dickens as a British institution: “A definition of English character which includes individuality, a sense of humour, a sense of fairplay, stoicism and the stiff upper lip, a capacity for moral indignation, a mistrust of authority, love of home and gardens, sport and animals, a spirit of ‘dauntless decency’ could equally be given as a summary of the Dickensian ethos” (327). Given that Dickens represented (and continues to represent) so many facets of English character, it is understandable that the British are proud of the author’s artistic legacy.
The perception of Dickens as being inherently British raises questions about the adaptation (and appropriation) of Dickens in other media. Both British and American writers have adapted Dickens for the stage and screen, and while the personality of the writer will undoubtedly influence his or her approach to the material, the issue of cultural/historical background will inevitably shape the final product as well. Richards analyzes this idea in his text, and his assessment of the various motion picture adaptations of Dickens’s novels that have been produced by Hollywood and the British film industry over the course of the twentieth century makes it clear that the English feel a certain level of protectiveness regarding the cultural property of Dickens. Nevertheless, Richards does not go so far as to claim that the British have a monopoly on film versions of Dickens. Instead, he applauds both American and British filmmakers for their excellent film versions of Dickens’s works while acknowledging the different angles from which the adaptors have worked. Several classic American adaptations produced by MGM in the 1930s present a cheery and optimistic Dickensian world that accentuates the humor and warmth of the author’s novels—in this way, Dickens offered a relief from the woes of the Depression and an almost fairytale vision of a more romantic era that had since passed. The 1934 adaptation of *David Copperfield* starring W.C. Fields as Mr. Micawber remains one of the best loved early American film versions of a Dickensian novel; the 1938 American film adaptation of *A Christmas Carol* presents an equally optimistic worldview. If the Depression-era American films represent the bright elements of Dickens, the post-World War II era British adaptations focus on the darker, more disquieting aspects of his writing: David Lean’s outstanding film versions of *Great Expectations* (1945) and *Oliver Twist* (1948), along with Brian D. Hurst’s *A Christmas Carol* (1951), are noteworthy for their pervasive gloominess and psychoanalytic emphases.
Richards offers the highest praise for both the American and British filmmakers behind these projects, though he stresses that the reason the early American film versions of Dickens’s novels worked so well is because they stayed very true to the novels, and more specifically, the Englishness of the novels: “Even in Hollywood, authenticity was uppermost in the film-makers’ minds. Producer David Selznick and director George Cukor wanted as many English actors as possible in the cast [of *David Copperfield*] and for the boy David cast a film newcomer, the English Freddie Bartholomew, overruling studio chief Louis B. Mayer’s preference for the American Jackie Cooper, who would have been catastrophically miscast” (334). The preservation of the British elements in the source material by the creative team is of great importance to Richards. It is therefore unsurprising when he criticizes the more Americanized film adaptations of Dickens’s novels, specifically Richard Donner’s 1988 film, *Scrooged*:

Richard Donner’s *Scrooged* (1988) is a vulgar, coarse, and degraded updating of Dickens with the charmless Bill Murray playing Scrooge as a foul-mouthed, crass and self-seeking television executive who after being visited by the ghosts (Christmas Past is a raucous New York taxi-driver; Christmas Present a female fury who keeps slugging him) sees the light. He makes a rambling television confession and promises to turn over a new leaf. The crudity and grossness of the “comic” proceedings are hitched to a smug sense of political correctness: the Cratchits are black; Scrooge’s girlfriend runs a shelter for derelicts and recalls that they used to have “good sex” (the obligatory ingredient for modern Hollywood well-being) before he became obsessed with his career. It is enough to make Dickens turn over in his grave. (338)

The incorporation of the British Dickens into an American institution like Hollywood is troubling to Richards when it means disregarding (and perhaps even degrading) the cultural legacy of the source. It is one thing to produce an American film version of a Dickens novel—it is another thing to Americanize Dickens. Given Boz’s status as the most

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1 Richards is far less harsh with another Americanized version of the *Carol*, Capra’s *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1944), though this most likely relates to the fact that Capra’s film, while Dickensian in its tone and content, is not a direct adaptation of *A Christmas Carol*. *Scrooged* is clearly a direct adaptation, no matter how poorly executed.
canonically British novelist of all time, the protectiveness that certain British scholars and critics feel regarding the author’s works is understandable. Consequently, the Englishness of Dickens is a sticking point when incorporating him into an American medium, such as a Hollywood film (or a musical).

This issue of appropriating Dickens and incorporating him into non-British media spans beyond the genre of film, however. In Chapter 6 of *Charles Dickens in Cyberspace*, Jay Clayton meticulously describes the various cultural appropriations of Dickens, which range from a video dating service called *Great Expectations* to comic book versions of the novel of the same name: “Like it or not, this sort of phenomenon is a way in which Dickens lives on at the turn of the millennium. A grotesque, misshapen afterlife, one might say, as unsettling as the manias that animate some of Dickens’ own creations: Miss Havisham in her decaying bridal dress, or Pip fantasizing about his great expectations” (147). If we are to believe Richards’s assertion that blatantly non-British film adaptations such as *Scrooged* would have Dickens rolling over in his grave, one might go so far as to argue that assigning the title of his greatest novel to either a string of comic books, or worse yet, a dating service, might have the author rising from the dead to exact a zombie-like revenge upon those responsible for this degradation.

Clearly, the cultural (and pop-cultural) battle over representations of Dickens’s novels remains controversial. Jeffery Sconce examines this conflict in an essay entitled “Dickens, Selznick, and Southpark” as he analyzes David Selznick’s meticulous attention to detail and unwavering respect for the source material in his approach to adapting *David Copperfield*. It is important to recall that one of the reasons Richards offers such praise to this film adaptation is that the movie, though produced in Hollywood, stressed the British cultural
roots of the novel. Conversely, an episode of the satirical cartoon show *South Park* entitled “Pip” is not only meant to lampoon Dickens’s *Great Expectations* but the larger cultural issues surrounding American representations of classical British texts as well: “It demonstrates that the English (and American Anglophiles) no longer speak from the position of absolute cultural authority evident in Selznick’s day. If MGM harnessed its vast resources to produce a ‘most pretentious production,’ this particular episode of *Southpark* [sic] opens by explicitly puncturing such ‘pretension’” (181). In this version of *Great Expectations*, Pip must team up with Herbert Pocket, Magwitch, and Joe Gargery to stop Miss Havisham, who is planning on using an army of robot monkeys (powered by the tears of men) to conquer the world! The humor lies not only in the spoof of Dickens’s novel, but in the larger satirical treatment of adapting great literature for popular media, as the creators of *South Park* lambaste the traditional ideals of adaptive fidelity and cultural significance. While most American adaptors of Dickens’s novels have not gone to the extremes of the *South Park* version of *Great Expectations*, Dickens has been Americanized many times over, and Richards’s disregard for films such as *Scrooged* indicates a larger British resentment towards American writers who have tried to adapt Dickens while ignoring his cultural significance in Britain. Though Dickens’s transatlantic appeal is undeniable, his characteristic Englishness means that various British scholars, cultural critics, and adaptors have sought to emphasize the English tradition embodied in his writings.

While Dickens’s importance as a British cultural institution is indisputable, the status of the musical as an American cultural institution is perhaps more open to debate. The modern musical evolved from different forms of theater, many of which incorporated music. Some of these traditions span back centuries before the United States had even come into being,
and numerous historical texts trace the evolution of the modern musical from British sources, such as the ballad opera. Other writers dismiss these connections, and, in somewhat defensive terms, insist that the genre is purely American. Composer Jerry Herman, who wrote such classic musicals as *Hello, Dolly!*, *Mame*, and *La Cage aux Folles*, asserts that the musical “is America’s own art form, this is not what we have copied from anybody else, this is ours” (qtd. in Guernsey 132). No matter what British or European forms of musical theater prefigured the modern musical, there seems to be something quintessentially American about this particular theatrical genre.

For certain, the artists we most associate with the musical are American. The golden age of musical theater was defined by illustrious names such as Richard Rodgers, Oscar Hammerstein II, Leonard Bernstein, Cole Porter, Meredith Wilson, Frank Loesser, Alan Lerner, and Frederick Loewe. Even before these artists took up the musical and refined it into its modern form, American writers like George M. Cohan and Jerome Kern were sowing the seeds for the emergence of the modern musical form; Cohan adopted British conventions and transformed them into a new genre that would “appeal to an American, particularly middle-class, audience. The romance of British musical comedy was transposed from a pure tale of love and marriage to an optimistic celebration of American life and the possibilities of success for everybody” (Walsh and Platt 46). Though the roots of the American musical could be traced back to British forms of theater, the modern musical genre seemed inherently American.

The debate over British involvement in the formation of the American musical became even more heated in the 1970s when the musical became a more internationalist form of entertainment. The “British invasion” led by Andrew Lloyd Webber marked a distinct shift
in musical conventions, an issue which will be discussed in detail shortly. Nevertheless, Scott Miller points out that “in the estimation of many (perhaps biased) theatre people, [musical theatre] is still done best by Americans” (6). Many scholars have written texts that reaffirm Miller’s assertion by emphasizing the American qualities of the genre and the relevance of the form to traditional American culture. In *Our Musicals, Ourselves*, John Bush Jones expounds a social history of the American musical and discusses how the types of musicals that were produced in various decades of the twentieth century correlated with the social and political trends of that particular time frame. While some of Jones’s conclusions are open to debate, the author admirably attempts to present a detailed account of how American musicals have always been connected directly with American culture. As David Walsh and Len Platt assert, “the musical show offers a characteristically open, direct, and ideologically unapologetic expression of the ideals, dreams, anxieties, feelings, fulfillments, and frustrations of its audience” (1). But it is not enough to examine the historical emergence of the musical in America and label it an essentially American genre, nor is it satisfactory to state that the musical is quintessentially American simply because the artists who helped to shape the genre were all American. Rather, it is important to analyze the defining characteristics of the musical and their correlation with American culture.

Raymond Knapp labels the American musical as “one of three distinctively American and widely influential art forms that took shape in the first half of the twentieth century. Like jazz and American film, whose histories intertwine significantly with its own, the American musical has continued to evolve into the present, both accommodating changes in American culture and society and, in turn, helping to shape their development in profound ways” (3). Like Jones, Knapp perceives the correlation between America’s social history and the
development of the American musical, though he pushes the matter further, asserting that the American musical is fundamentally concerned with “constructions of America” (104):

Sometimes, this is merely implicit; sometimes, seemingly, a matter of habit. Fundamentally, though, this stems from the simple fact that American musicals play to American audiences, who will be acutely aware of anything that challenges their notions of what or who America is or stands for, or of its place in the world. 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’s emphases, 104)

Lehman Engel echoes this sentiment and links the development of the American musical to the progression of America’s national identity: “The growth of the American musical theatre followed the development of American cultural consciousness and national maturity” (American 3). For certain, the fact that the modern musical evolved from earlier musical traditions, including the British tradition of the comic opera, presents an intriguing view of the genre’s development. In a way, the journey toward the advent of the modern musical marked a second movement toward independence from Britain, as American musicians, composers, and lyricists adopted and adapted British forms to suit the conventions and customs of American culture. Both Engel and Knapp acknowledge that the musical’s roots are connected back to America’s British heritage; the earliest musicals to appear on the North American continent were written in the tradition of The Beggar’s Opera (1728). Robert Lawson-Peeples astutely observes that just as The Beggar’s Opera brought together elements from each rung of the social ladder, “the American musical has been similarly, and possibly just as deliberately, indiscriminate. It draws on vaudeville and the so-called ‘legitimate’ theatre, on burlesque and opera” (1). When Gilbert and Sullivan’s British comic opera HMS Pinafore first reached the American musical stage in 1878, it created a sensation; the affable satire of British virtues and navy culture was highly appreciated by nineteenth-century American audiences. However, Americans appropriated the British source and reinterpreted
its central themes so that they correlated more implicitly with the American ethos: “In so construing this verbal exchange and making it their own, nineteenth-century Americans were implicitly misreading the show; indeed, their reception of [‘What, never?’] points to their more general tendency to broaden the show’s critique of class-based hierarchies, and to see that critique as its central overriding theme” (Knapp 39). Knapp claims that the arrival of the British comic opera in the post-Civil War era, combined with the development of domestic traditions such as minstrelsy, burlesque, and vaudeville, created the spark from which modern musical theater would eventually emerge, thus reinforcing the idea that there was something both revolutionary and distinctly American about the new form of entertainment.

Engel also acknowledges the importance of Gilbert and Sullivan to the emergence of the American musical, though he too specifies that Americans took the conventions of the British and modified them to fit in with the democratic tenor of the country’s culture: “If the American musical grew out of European operetta, other forces were at work to help stamp its character and make it possible. One of the things necessary for the growth of the new musical theatre was the liberation of its practitioners from the old romantic musical form. One of the primary instruments of this liberation was the revue” (American 16). The musical revues of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were democratic in that they presented new opportunities for diverse talents. This revue format allowed for the emergence of the great songwriters who would define the early conventions of American musical theater, and the movement toward a fully-integrated, modern form of musical theater which combined music, songs, plot, and characters into a unified whole was progressing rapidly.

The earliest versions of the integrated book musical epitomize elements of American culture and American music. Early book shows, including Kern and Hammerstein’s Show
Boat and Gershwin’s Porgy and Bess, dealt with cultural (and racial) issues that were deeply embedded in American society. The scores to both shows were likewise reflective of American traditions and America’s interracial culture: “Both grew out of American soil—Kern’s score was rich in ragtime idioms, and Gershwin’s featured jazz music and Gullah Rhythms and language” (Flinn 206). Even less taut shows like Porter’s Anything Goes reflected an American attitude and spirit; Knapp points out that the gentle satire of British priggishness in Porter’s show, which was clearly steeped in the tradition of American (mis)interpretations of HMS Pinafore, reinforced the notion “that mid-1930s America could solve its own Depression-era problems without Europe, and would be better served by doing so” (89). All of these elements paved the way for what many consider to be the first fully integrated musical, and it is not surprising that this show embodies the character and spirit of America.

Rodgers and Hammerstein’s Oklahoma! defined the conventions of the book musical, as no single element of this play, be it the music, the choreography, the plot, or the characters, is more important than any other component. Rather, the musical is characterized by the sum of its parts. Oklahoma! celebrates the American qualities of the musical genre by celebrating American culture in all of its glory. As Knapp writes: “Even if Oklahoma! had not launched an important chapter in the history of the American musical, it would have been historically important for the role it played in providing America with a strongly embodied sense of a central national myth” (123). Tim Carter furthers this idea in his meticulously researched “biographical” text on the development of Oklahoma!: “Clearly, Oklahoma! embraces that set of political, social, and cultural beliefs and practices known as the ‘American way.’ Good-hearted country folk forge a new life and a new future by virtue of hard work and core
values” (192). In view of the fact that America was still embedded in World War II when *Oklahoma!* premiered, the show’s celebration of the country’s distinctive virtues, as embodied by the western setting and working-class characters, resonated deeply with a populace that was recovering from a devastating depression and dealing with a destructive global conflict. Walsh and Platt explain the significance of *Oklahoma!*’s setting and characters to the American theatergoer in the 1940s:

The seemingly modest and homey world that *Oklahoma!* represents takes on a much grander signification as the musical unfolds. It symbolizes the American Dream of a social world that embodies the best in modern human life; it presents America as the promised “land of the free” wrought by the individual and collective labor of its inhabitants. When the show opens with Aunt Eller churning milk to make butter and Curly singing “Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin’,” it sets before the audience a hymn to America as the new Garden of Eden. (104-105)

The most remembered songs from *Oklahoma!* supplement the idyllic vision of America and the celebration of simple values such as hard work and optimism. The title number, sung after the marriage of Curly and Laurey, is a salute to both the pioneer spirit and to American pride—thus, the celebration of the happily married couple is a larger celebration of the virtues that their union represents. In short, Rodgers and Hammerstein succeeded in creating a new American art form which not only built upon a tradition of American songs and theatrical conventions, but which simultaneously rejoiced in the celebratory aspects of America’s cultural tradition. The new art form of the American book musical, like America itself, emerged from British roots; however, it quickly attained an identity of its own. As Carter points out:

…the various issues concerning *Oklahoma!* began to enter the discourse even of relatively “highbrow” critics concerned with the theatre. One was whether *Oklahoma!* somehow contributed to the emergence of a contemporary “American” art form that could vie on equal terms with such European imports as “serious” spoken drama on the one hand, and opera on the other. Here the connections drawn with Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*…formed part of a broader agenda. *Oklahoma!* and *Porgy and Bess* each dealt with
an American (and equally important, a non-European) subject, each drew on American popular song, and each appeared in Broadway theatres rather than in the iconic institutions of high culture. The demotic overtones are obvious: “American” art was to be by the people, for the people. (206)

That *Oklahoma!* is usually cited as the first example of a truly integrated book musical reinforces the fact that this entertainment genre is inherently connected with American culture. There is a symbiotic relationship between form and subject matter, for the book musical format employed by Rodgers and Hammerstein was an American innovation that emerged from a distinctly American tradition of stage music; meanwhile the thematic emphasis on cowboys, farmers, and the settlement of the west by common folks who embodied America’s frontier spirit underscores the distinctly American ethos of the art form.

*Oklahoma!* went on to become the biggest musical success Broadway had ever seen up to that point, and Rodgers and Hammerstein’s first masterpiece quickly became the archetype for the American musical. Almost all of the great book shows of the golden age dealt with American culture and society, and even those musicals which did not directly address such matters contained distinctly American concerns: *Annie Get Your Gun* continued the celebration of the west in America’s cultural mythos; *Guys and Dolls* shifted the focus from the prairie to the city and presented a more urbanized American mythology, complete with a humorous satire of post-war domesticity; *The Music Man*, based on Meredith Wilson’s own reflections of mid-western Americana, employed melodies and lyrics directly evocative of the small-town culture it was meant to replicate. Even musicals set in foreign lands retained thematic relevance to issues affecting Americans and American society. Lerner and Loewe’s best loved work, *My Fair Lady*, maintained the satirical portrait of British culture so common in American musicals of the era, and simultaneously emphasized the breakdown of social castes, thus underscoring the American ideal of a classless society in which one can better
oneself through perseverance. *Fiddler on the Roof* may have been set in czarist Russia, but its emphasis on the collapse of traditions was especially relevant to American audiences in the 1960s. Later musicals from the likes of Sondheim, Kander and Ebb, and Ashman and Menken, also focused on American issues, though the issues presented were not always celebratory: Sondheim’s *Company* emphasized the failure of the traditional ideal of marriage in the 1970s, Kander and Ebb’s *Chicago* satirized the American media’s tendency to lionize criminals, and Ashman and Menken’s *Little Shop of Horrors* was a fable about the dangers of unbridled capitalism. In short, no matter what viewpoint one takes regarding the tradition from which the modern musical emerged, the final product was defined by its American qualities.

If the British are justifiably defensive regarding the cultural appropriation of Dickens, then American composers, theater critics, and scholars are equally cautious about foreigners appropriating the musical genre. This protectiveness is exemplified by the American response to the advent of the European mega-musical, a subgenre which dictated trends in musical theater from the early 1980s through the mid-1990s and whose aftereffects are still being felt on Broadway to this day.

Up until the 1960s, the British musical stage was dominated by imports from America. Shows like *Oklahoma!* and *Guys and Dolls* found great success in the West End, but while American shows attained success in Britain, British shows rarely translated well to Broadway. Though several British musicals were able to find an audience in the West End, the musical genre as a whole was shaped by American trends, American tastes, and American artists. Lionel Bart’s 1960 masterpiece *Oliver!* proved an important exception to the rule by achieving tremendous popularity both in the West End and on Broadway. Other
famous British composers and songwriters from the 1960s, such as Leslie Bricusse and Anthony Newley, managed to find transatlantic fame as well. Despite these successes, the musical genre was still viewed by many as quintessentially American. Denny Martin Flinn writes that “the English simply do not know how to do musicals. At least that was the wisdom during Broadway’s golden age, and there was some truth to the xenophobic statement” (323). Flinn points out that several historical factors slowed down the evolution of the British musical, which accounts for why the American shows imported to Britain from Broadway took the West End by storm. Even English theatrical historian Sheridan Morley begins his text on the history of the British musical, *Spread a Little Happiness*, by acknowledging the contrasts between the dominance of the American musical and the more subdued status of the English musical: “Admittedly, the British stage musical has never achieved on its home territory the dominance that its American counterpart has had on Broadway: the musical is without any doubt America’s greatest achievement in the live theatre in this century, whereas in Britain there lingers a faint unwillingness to accord classic status to song-and-dance shows” (7). Morley tellingly notes that “the descriptive ‘musical’ barley needed the modifying ‘Broadway’ or ‘American’, so closely were the terms allied” (*Mr. Producer* 10); from a cultural and historical standpoint, the musical seems essentially American, and it has been shaped by American tastes, trends, and techniques.

This pattern shifted in the 1970s and 80s when Andrew Lloyd Webber became the driving force, not only in British theater, but simultaneously on Broadway. The coming of Lloyd Webber marked the dawn of the mega-musical, a European variation on the traditional American musical. Most mega-musicals share several dominant traits. First, the stories are usually somehow epic and grapple with universal themes and large-scale issues. Secondly,
the music is basically continuous, with characters singing almost everything that they say.

On a similar note, the music in a mega-musical often incorporates a pop idiom, which sometimes allows the songs incorporated into the score to become breakout hits outside the context of the musical itself. Another element that emphasizes the “mega” in “mega-musicals” is the staging; the sets, properties, special effects, and blocking are all spectacular and there is a sense of physical hugeness about the musical itself. The shows that are most associated with the mega-musical genre are instantly recognizable due to the fact that another defining facet of the mega-musical is its tendency to run “forever”—shows such as *Cats*, *Les Miserables*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, and *Miss Saigon* dominated the Broadway box office for years. Through the coming of the mega-musical, the traditional elements of musical theater shifted, and the musical itself, having always been viewed as an American institution, became more associated with European trends.

The five people most often linked with the mega-musical movement are all European: composers Andrew Lloyd Webber, Claude-Michel Schönberg, Alain Boublil; director Trevor Nunn; and producer Sir Cameron Mackintosh. Though Schönberg and Boublil are not British, they are clearly from the same school as Lloyd Webber and the musicals that they have written are perhaps best described as Anglo-French. Nunn, who directed the original productions of *Cats*, *Starlight Express*, *Chess*, and *Les Miserables*, was an important creative force behind the ascension of the mega-musical in the West End and on Broadway. Finally, Mackintosh’s hands-on approach to the theatrical production process, along with his business savvy in the marketing of musicals, has proven essential to the success of the mega-musical movement.

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2 Barry Singer describes Boublil and Schönberg’s most popular show, *Les Miserables*, as “an homage to the Lloyd Webber musical model” (41), a description which he means to be unflattering.
The mega-musical is a sore point for many musical-theater traditionalists. In her text on the mega-musical movement, Jessica Sternfeld mentions that the mega-musical:

is generally not loved by critics. Audiences might flock to see the latest spectacular show, lured by the hype and then returning year after year, even across decades, because they love the music, the story and the atmosphere of these powerful, escapist pieces of theatre. But critics generally tend to give megamusicals mixed, lukewarm reviews. A few American critics, especially in the 1980s, hated them on principle: created by foreign invaders, these shows had no substance, just pretty tunes and shiny sets. (4)

Prominent New York theater critics such as Frank Rich and Walter Kerr have unhesitatingly spoken out against the mega-musical trend. Furthermore, in several scholarly texts on the history and development of the American musical, various researchers drop their objective and erudite tone when discussing the works of Lloyd Webber and resort instead to harsh, subjective, and perhaps even vindictive criticism. In *Ever After*, Barry Singer blames the rise of the mega-musical on the fall of audience tastes, and the author is highly critical of the three mega-musicals that epitomized 1980s Broadway: *Cats*, *Les Miz*, and *Phantom*:

*Cats*, when it first appeared, was at least a flight of fancy. No musical had ever before quite looked as director Trevor Nunn, designer John Napier, and choreographer Gillian Lynne made *Cats* look. These innovations were, however, nearly entirely cosmetic. The show’s be-whiskered painted faces, its calculatingly frolicsome façade grew more irritating by the instant. So did its super-sized trash dump of a set. As for Lloyd Webber’s predictably operatic-pop-rock score, as defined by the Puccini-inspired hit, “Memory,” its sound already had crossed the cusp of cliché. Despite this musical’s future history-making box office longevity, *Cats* in the end had little aesthetic staying power at all. (21)

*Les Miz* also spewed its emotions with zeal. Though what was being invoked here most resembled the emotionalism of fascist political rallies (absent the hate content), audiences related easily to these outpourings. *This*, they believed, was real feeling. (Singer’s emphases, 43)

*Phantom* has remained an accretion of clichés—nearly impossible to strip clean for purposes of analysis. Suffice to say that Lloyd Webber’s ersatz-operatic pop score, set to pedestrian lyrics by the previously unknown Charles Hart, was rife with inspiration from Puccini. (46)

Equally harsh is Denny Martin Flinn, who views the mega-musical as a mere marketing
campaign: “The mass merchandising of art for the sake of commerce has caused a decline in the quality of American culture, and there is no clearer signpost than the rise to fame and fortune of Andrew Lloyd Webber, who has created scarce melodies for abysmal librettos, and expensive, dismal choreographed extravaganzas” (474). Flinn describes Lloyd Webber as a manipulator of techniques and conventions rather than a creator of works of art. He likewise finds fault with the sung-through formula incorporated into many mega-musicals, as there is no true sense of technique when everything in the show is sung. Like Singer, Flinn condemns all the major mega-musicals, *Cats, Phantom, Les Miz, Miss Saigon*, and laments the transformation of Broadway from an artistic institution to a commercial center. Perhaps Richard Kislan sums up traditionalist criticisms of Lloyd Webber and the mega-musical movement most concisely: “Great box office need not mean great theatre” (273).

The economic effect of the mega-musical on Broadway is certainly one of the reasons that it remains such a controversial genre, but the cultural elements of this conflict are far more important. Sternfeld’s use of the term “foreign invaders” underscores the cultural issues at stake in the debate, and the harsh rhetoric employed by many American critics when discussing mega-musicals seems evocative of how sensitive individuals can be in matters of patriotic loyalty. The idea of the American musical, which, as Knapp pointed out, is one of the country’s few indigenous art forms, being supplanted by the British/European mega-musical is a rallying cry for traditionalists. Many have struck back through the weapon of canonization, for as Sternfeld points out, very few scholars have included the mega-musical in their studies: “This seems to be the result of a combination of factors: loyalty to the Golden Era or to [Stephen] Sondheim or to America, resentment of foreign invaders, resentment of Lloyd Webber’s success, and resistance to anything so popular that it feels
unscholarly to discuss it” (6). The Sondheim vs. Lloyd Webber rivalry (largely concocted by their fans as opposed to being based on any personal animosity between the two men) embodies the cultural elements of the debate. Sondheim, born in New York and mentored by the father of the modern American musical, Oscar Hammerstein II, has taken the genre to bold new places while simultaneously preserving the elements of the musical that are ingrained in the American traditions of Rodgers and Hammerstein, Lerner and Loewe, and Frank Loesser. Lloyd Webber, born in London and essentially British in both his approach and his subject matter, has taken the modern musical from its roots and shaped it in the traditions of Europe—a sort of reverse-evolution when one considers that the modern American musical emerged in part from those very same traditions.

If British scholars are adamant about preserving the Englishness of Dickens, whom they view as more than just an author, but rather, as a cultural institution, many American scholars are equally passionate about preserving the American qualities of the musical, which they view as more than just a genre, but rather, an integral part of American culture. With emotions running high on both sides and feelings of protectiveness dominating the views of people in both camps, the Overture’s assessment of the musical qualities of Dickens’s writing becomes problematic. It matters little if Dickens is a more musical novelist than any of his contemporaries, for to musicalize Dickens involves reconciling different cultural traditions. To create an integrated musical adaptation of Dickens, one must place the British author into an American genre/idiom, for the book musical is fundamentally American. Preserving the author’s Englishness is thus a challenge, for how can Dickens retain his distinctly British qualities when integrated into an American medium? Conversely, to write a mega-musical adaptation of Dickens creates a different set of problems. While the scale of the mega-
musical would accommodate the epic tenor of Dickens’s novels, and while the British roots of this genre would undoubtedly suit the Englishness of the source, the frequent criticisms of mega-musicals as usurpers of the American tradition would create another cultural conflict. In either case, writing a musical version of a Dickens novel seems to involve inherently difficult negotiations.

Lionel Bart successfully overcame these difficulties in the creation of *Oliver!*, a show that operated in an American genre while simultaneously employing a British source, idiom, and musical tradition. The fact that Bart was so capable of bridging the gap between these two cultures is a testament to his creativity and imagination, not only as a composer and lyricist, but simultaneously as a librettist. Though *Oliver!* is structured like an American book show, it is fundamentally British thanks in some part to the inherent Englishness of Dickens, and in even greater part to the fundamentally English talents and techniques of Lionel Bart. *Oliver!* did not simply spring forth from the mind of its creator onto the stage, however, nor did it emerge in a vacuum. The history of *Oliver!* is connected to two other separate yet equally important histories, both of which must be considered when analyzing the development of Bart’s masterpiece. The first is the history of *Oliver Twist* in performance. The second is the history of British musical theater in the early half of the twentieth century. These two historical traditions became unlikely bedfellows through both the genius of Lionel Bart and the experimentalism of 1960s English theater, and they must serve as the starting point of any analysis of *Oliver!*

The phenomenal popularity of *Oliver Twist* in other media begets a somewhat disparaging question: why? Why should this particular novel have proved so popular with adaptors, not only in the nineteenth-century but in the present day, especially when one considers that
Dickens wrote so many better novels over the course of his distinguished career? This is not to say that *Oliver Twist* is a bad novel. All the same, it is highly unlikely that *Oliver Twist* will ever be regarded as one of Dickens’s greatest either. Though it contains the same level of passionate social criticism displayed in such masterpieces as *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*, it lacks the sophistication and unity of these later works. Whereas *Bleak House* revolves around the pervasive corruption of Chancery, and *Little Dorrit* is centered on the confinement of an entire society through the bureaucratic neglectfulness of the government, the social criticism presented in *Twist* is somewhat incoherent. While the workhouse system and the Benthamite philosophy behind it are targeted by the author, the number of scenes set in the workhouse is comparatively small; furthermore, various issues such as the hero’s purity, as well as the revelation of his true pedigree in the final chapters of the novel, ultimately complicate (and undermine) many criticisms of the workhouse system as they are presented in the story.

Given the fact that *Oliver Twist* was published nearly twenty years before *Bleak House*, it is understandable that this early novel would not contain the same level of complexity and erudition as its successor. Nevertheless, *Twist* does not fit in squarely with the other novels of Dickens’s early period either. In comparison to the other works of Dickens’s immature years, *Twist* does not possess the amiable humor of the picaresque-style novels like *The Pickwick Papers* and *Nicholas Nickleby*; though *Twist* is undoubtedly a funny novel, the humor is often dark (in the case of the morbid comedy of the workhouse scenes) or cynical (in the case of the wry comments of Dickens’s overly assertive narrator, or the equally sarcastic Artful Dodger). The curious dichotomy between the merry and cohesive world of
Mr. Pickwick and the violent and disjointed world of Oliver corresponds well to the limitless energy, tenacious experimentalism, and endless ambitions of the young Dickens.

Although *Oliver Twist* was Dickens’s second novel, it marked many important firsts for the young author. It was the first novel to feature an orphaned and neglected child as the protagonist. Oliver is thus the forebear to many other Dickensian heroes and heroines. Additionally, *Twist* was the first novel to deal intimately with the themes of crime and criminality, two issues that would prove fundamental to many of Dickens’s later works. *Oliver Twist* was also the first novel to incorporate true social outrage into the narrative. Though *Pickwick Papers* addresses certain social issues, chiefly in the Fleet scenes, Mr. Pickwick is not truly a victim of society’s corruption in the same fashion as Oliver, for his setbacks are almost always the result of his own naïveté—Oliver’s setbacks, particularly in the novel’s early chapters, are brought on by matters outside of his control. He is “the victim of a systematic course of treachery and deception” (3) as perpetuated by the institution into which he is born. The topicality of *Twist* indicates that the young Dickens was now willing to use the medium of the novel for bold new purposes.³

Between the experiments in plot, characterization, and social criticism taking place within the text (and the conflicts over publication matters surrounding the text), it is clear why the most common criticism of *Oliver Twist* is that the novel is disjointed. Though the story offers a brutal and stark portrayal of poverty and criminality, it is simultaneously structured around a character who exists in purely allegorical terms. In the oft-quoted 1841 Preface to

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³ It is also important to remember that *Oliver Twist* was the first novel written by Dickens upon the author’s attainment of literary fame. The young writer’s confidence in his own marketability, as brought on by the phenomenal success of *Pickwick Papers*, meant that he was able to approach *Oliver Twist* with a true sense of empowerment (though given the fact that Dickens had managed to wrest control of *Pickwick* away from Chapman, Hall, and Seymour early on in the development of the project, it is difficult to say that he lacked such a sense of empowerment upon the writing of his very first novel).
the novel, Dickens asserts that “I wished to shew, in little Oliver, the principle of Good surviving through every adverse circumstance, and triumphing at last” (liii). In the same Preface, however, Dickens defends his depiction of Fagin, Nancy, the Artful Dodger, and the other criminal characters by asserting that his portrayal of these criminals was not meant to romanticize the underworld, but rather, to accurately capture the essence of their deprivation: “To paint them in all their deformity, in all their wretchedness, in all the squalid poverty of their lives; to shew them as they really are, for ever skulking uneasily through the dirtiest paths of life, with the great, black, ghastly gallows closing up their prospect” (liv). Joseph Sawicki points out how the Preface reveals that Dickens wanted to have it both ways, for “on the one hand, he asserts (responding to contemporary reviewers of the novel) that he has attempted to present his characters, especially the Fagin group, in the most realistic way….At the same time, he argues that his intention was also of a more allegorical nature” (23)—hence the depiction of young Oliver as being inherently incorruptible. This contrast between the realistic depiction of the thieves’ den and the allegorical depiction of Oliver is perhaps the most fundamental contradiction within the novel, though there are numerous examples of such disjointedness throughout the story.

The novel starts out as a dark and intelligent satire of how the inhumanity of the workhouse system is directly responsible for the creation of London’s criminal underworld. Oliver’s flight from the parish is spurred on in part by his fears of Mr. Bumble, the chief representative of the hypocrisy, self-indulgence, and abusiveness of the workhouse system. This flight sends him into the waiting arms of Fagin, an occurrence which underscores the thematic links between poverty and criminality. The camaraderie provided by Fagin’s gang is certainly preferable to the miserable isolation of the workhouse, but this comradeship
comes at a very high price: morality. The question of whether or not the price is too high is
an enticing one, but Dickens does not bother to answer it. Instead of exploring the deeper
issues raised by the links between the workhouse and the thieves’ den, Dickens transforms
the narrative into an overly sentimental and thoroughly unrealistic quest for the protagonist to
discover his true identity. Not only are the results of his search far removed from the earlier
issues regarding the workhouse and Fagin’s den, but they are also completely implausible.4
The coincidences surrounding Oliver’s progression toward happiness and middle-class
domesticity ultimately fracture the novel.

One could conceivably divide the story into three basic parts based on the three
environments in which Oliver finds himself: the workhouse, London, and the countryside.
Obviously, London could be further separated into two very different subsections: Fagin’s
den and Mr. Brownlow’s house. While the connections between the workhouse and Fagin’s
world are inherently important to Dickens’s satire of the Poor Laws, the links between the
other environments are much more difficult to discern. This lack of continuity is
underscored by the fact that there are no real connections between the separate groups of
people presented in these sections. The dark presentation of the workhouse has little to do
with the depiction of Mr. Brownlow’s middle-class world, and even less to do with the
idealized domesticity of the Maylie family in the country. The links between Fagin’s den
and these middle-class environments are even less discernible. John Fern writes that “where
Dickens really fails in Oliver Twist is in connecting his ideal world of affection (the Oliver,
Brownlow, Rose Maylie strand) to the world of deprivation in any significant way. There is

4 The number of coincidences Dickens uses to create a happy ending for his hero is absurd: the Artful Dodger
and Charley Bates just happen to pick the pocket of Mr. Brownlow, who just happens to be an old friend of
Oliver’s father, Edwin, who just happens to be the father of Monks as well. Sikes just happens to rob a
countryside house, which just happens to be the home of Rose Maylie, who just happens to be Oliver’s aunt.
simply a polarity here, a crude contrast” (88). Notably, Oliver himself plays a role in the disjointedness of the novel that bears his name while simultaneously providing the single unifying thread of the text.

Oliver is a fundamentally reactive hero. Even his most memorable actions in the novel are not the result of his own desires. Sawicki points out that the scene in which Oliver asks for more gruel is meant to be taken as a sign of Oliver’s “capacity for right action” (24), but likewise states that the power of the episode is undermined by the fact that Oliver does not act out of choice: he is randomly assigned the task when he draws the long straw. Given the protagonist’s passivity, the reader rarely finds himself asking “what will Oliver do next?”, though the question of “what will happen to Oliver next?” is enticing given the large number of people conspiring both for and against him throughout the novel. Geoffrey Thurley notes that the novel is fundamentally about “the safety of Oliver Twist. It is a remarkable achievement to sustain so intense an interest upon such a fragile basis….Yet this sparseness of narrative material, far from being a weakness, is precisely the secret of its excellence. The narrative flickers with apprehension whenever Oliver’s security is threatened; a large number of secondary characters in the novel exist only to menace Oliver” (106). Oliver’s vulnerability leaves him susceptible to threats, abuse, manipulation, and neglect, and yet throughout all of his sufferings, he remains as innocent as ever, thus fulfilling his duty as a representative of pure goodness.

The chief problem with this kind of characterization is that it undermines Dickens’s satire of the workhouse system. As Humphry House observes, “if the purpose [of the novel] were to show that the starvation and cruel ill-treatment of children in baby-farms and workhouses produced ghastly effects on their characters and in society, then Oliver should have turned
out a monster or a wretch, a boy who did very well at Fagin’s school. Instead of this he remains always a paragon of sweet gratitude and the tenderest right feeling” (97). Dickens again tries to have things both ways. He attempts to link the workhouse to criminality by showing how one form of corruption begets another, but he also wishes to present his protagonist as invulnerable to such corruptions so as to reinforce his metaphorical treatment of the character.

At the end of the novel, when it is discovered that Oliver is the (illegitimate) son of an unmarried middle-class couple, the novel is fractured even further. Oliver’s goodness is the result of birthright: he is technically a member of the middle class and should have been raised as such. Thus, by the end of the story, it becomes quite clear why Oliver resists the corruption of his environments—he has inherited the middle-class morality of his parents. Despite the fact that he was unaware of the document’s existence, Oliver acts in complete accordance with the tenets of his father’s absurd (and hypocritical) will and testament by making sure to “never have stained his name with any public act of dishonour, meanness, cowardice, or wrong” (419). Though raised in a different station, he clings to the ideology that nature instilled in him.

Dickens’s assertion that Oliver was meant to represent the triumph of goodness over evil is thus compromised by the fact that Oliver should never have had to engage in that struggle in the first place. Barry Westburg analyzes the contradictory ideas that result from this plot device: “The hero ‘becomes’ what he has secretly been all along” (11). Indeed, when Oliver finally attains his happily-ever-after, it is more of a belated gift as opposed to a reward for goodness—he is elevated to a position that he should have held from the very beginning of the novel. What’s more, the issues regarding the workhouse remain largely unacknowledged
by either Oliver or his middle-class allies in the latter part of the book. The journey back to
the workhouse toward the end of the novel is meant to resolve the mystery surrounding
Oliver’s identity, which has nothing to do with the satirical portrayal of the barbarous system
in the early chapters of the novel.\(^5\)

The best moments in *Oliver Twist* are exactly that: moments. While the novel, as a whole,
is confused and contradictory, there are certain scenes, characters, and occurrences which
feature among the most memorable and entertaining instances in the Dickens canon.
Foremost among these moments is the now immortal scene in which the title character dares
to ask for more gruel, a scene which Paul Schlicke describes as “mythically evocative” and
“perhaps the most widely known image Dickens ever created” (*Oxford* 437). Less
memorable but just as significant are Dickens’s hilarious depiction of the sanctimonious and
sartorially obsessive Mr. Bumble, who ranks as one of the great comic achievements of the
author’s early period, and most of the scenes involving the Artful Dodger, which contain
traces of the brand of Cockney humor that had made Sam Weller such a popular character in
*The Pickwick Papers*. Simultaneously, the novel features some of Dickens’s most intensely
terrifying prose, particularly in the chapters following Sikes’s murder of Nancy, and, perhaps
even more effectively, in the scenes depicting Fagin’s final days before his execution. In
spite of its many flaws, there is clearly a great deal of power to the story of *Oliver Twist*, and
Schlicke’s use of the term “mythical” warrants closer scrutiny, for the mythical elements of
the novel may be what account for its phenomenal enduring power.

The legacy of *Oliver Twist* in other media is nothing short of remarkable. Juliet John notes
that “apart from *A Christmas Carol*, *Oliver Twist* is the most frequently adapted of Dickens’s

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\(^5\) The pathos-infused scene in which Oliver discovers that little Dick has died seems to be Dickens’s own concession that the evils of the workhouse are still in existence even though Oliver has attained a happy ending.
works” (1). Given that *A Christmas Carol* could be classified as either a novella or a Christmas book (or both) as opposed to a full-length work, *Twist* is thus the most frequently adapted novel in the entire Dickens canon. But why should *Twist* hold this distinction when Dickens went on to write better novels over the course of his long career? The answer to this question lies in both the mythical quality of Oliver’s journey, and simultaneously, in the striking visualizations associated with the story.

To return to Schlicke’s point about the image of Oliver asking for more, there is something fundamental about the appeal of *Oliver Twist*. Several critics have analyzed Dickens’s use of fairytale conventions in his fiction, and *Twist* contains numerous situations and characters lifted directly from the fairytale tradition.\(^6\) The appeal and enduring power of fairytales is almost primeval, as such stories tap into our most basic joys, hopes, dreams, and simultaneously, our most primal terrors and anxieties. We see these same emotions operating on a very similar level in *Oliver Twist*, as Dickens expertly adapts the conventions of fairytales to fit in with his socially-conscientious Victorian novel. Like most fairytale characters, Oliver is born good and remains intrinsically pure-hearted for his entire life. Harry Stone writes that Oliver’s incorruptibility and romantic origins place him squarely in the fairytale tradition: “Oliver, in other words, is immaculate; he is not subject to the stains and taints that shadow ordinary mortals. He is the prince in disguise, the noble scion in humble station, threatened and beleaguered by evil, but immune to it” (“Fairy-Tale” 36).

Oliver’s journey from rags to riches is clearly a Cinderella story, and we pull for Oliver for the same reasons that we pull for Cinderella and all underdogs. Other characters in the novel take on fairytale roles as well: Mr. Brownlow and Mrs. Maylie act as fairy godparents to

\(^6\) The only Dickens novel that seems to eclipse *Oliver Twist* in terms of links to the conventions of fairytales is *The Old Curiosity Shop*.
Oliver, and the perfectly happy ending which sees the child embraced by “a little society, whose condition approached as nearly to one of perfect happiness as can ever be known” (437) is a storybook conclusion. Also lifted from the tradition of fairytales are the wicked characters, most specifically, Fagin, who is just as terrifying a villain as any witch or demon from traditional lore. As Stone points out, “the forces of darkness that control the greater part of Oliver Twist are deeply entwined with fairy tales. At the center of those forces is Fagin, and Fagin is a creature out of folklore and nightmare” (“Fairy-Tale” 34). Fagin’s ability to tempt and corrupt children is reminiscent of many conventions in fairytales which present equally sinister villains who prey upon innocence. Indeed, Fagin’s seemingly superhuman power to haunt Oliver when the boy is in the precarious state between sleep and waking connects him further to the world of fairytales in which many of our deepest nightmares seem to evolve into terrifying realities. In spite of these terrors, good inevitably triumphs over evil in fairytales: Oliver naturally overcomes Fagin and Monks.

The enduring appeal of Oliver Twist can obviously be connected to the fundamental emotional resonance of the characters and situations presented by Dickens, which seem to rise above the conspicuous flaws in the novel. Equally important to the legacy of Twist in live action adaptations, however, is the original visual appeal of the novel itself. While controversy still remains over the conflict between Dickens and George Cruikshank regarding the conception of Twist, the lasting power of Cruikshank’s outstanding illustrations can never be discounted. Henry James acknowledged the significance of Cruikshank’s work in A Small Boy and Others, claiming “[Oliver Twist] perhaps even seemed to me more Cruikshank’s than Dickens’s; it was a thing of such vividly terrible images, and all marked

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7 Fagin is also clearly lifted from the tradition of the stage Jew, which is more in line with theatrical caricatures than fairytale characters, but the fairytale element cannot be discounted.
with that peculiarity of Cruikshank that the offered flowers or goodesses, the scenes and figures intended to comfort and cheer, present themselves under his hand as but more subtly sinister, or more suggestively queer, than the frank badness and horrors” (120). In “The Fiction of Realism,” J. Hillis Miller takes the idea even further and assesses how Dickens’s words and Cruikshank’s illustrations supplement one another: “The relation between text and illustration is clearly reciprocal. Each refers to the other. Each illustrates the other, in a continual back and forth movement which is incarnated in the experience of the reader as his eyes move from words to picture and back again, juxtaposing the two in a mutual establishment of meaning” (45). For certain, the interplay between Dickens’s highly visual style of writing and Cruikshank’s terrifying illustrations creates a vivid image that seems to jump from the page and translate naturally to a visual medium. It is little wonder that Victorian playwrights found *Oliver Twist* such an appealing source for theatrical adaptation, particularly when one considers the conventions of the Victorian stage.

Martin Miesel documents the links between text, illustration, and theater in *Realizations*, and the connections between these three media in the nineteenth century are significant. Miesel describes the importance of pictorial representations to the stage adaptations of the novels that appeared in Dickens’s own era, stating that the bridge between plays and fiction in this period was visual; one might actually go so far as to describe these plays as serial pictures, given that the episodes from Dickens’s novels presented in many of the theatrical versions were usually based around those moments in the book that had included an illustration (251). In Chapter 13 of his study, Miesel discusses the relationship between these different elements in regards to *Oliver Twist*, and uses George Almar’s early stage adaptation of the novel as his central example. Almar’s dramatization lifts dialogue and plot points
directly from Dickens’s novel, but simultaneously patterns itself on the visuals supplied by Cruikshank. The convention of the tableau allows for the playwright to create living, breathing versions of Cruikshank’s illustrations, or, at the very least, live action variations based on those illustrations. Given the visual appeal of such scenes as Oliver asking for more gruel, Mr. Bumble’s flirtation with Mrs. Corney, Sikes’s fatal attempt to flee the police, and Fagin’s last night alive as they are written by Dickens, coupled with Cruikshank’s evocative visual interpretations of these incidents, it is not surprising that adaptors like Almar were intrigued at the possibility of theatrically recreating these scenes. Hack playwrights in Dickens’s own age found \textit{Oliver Twist} unquestionably alluring in this regard; Richard P. Fulkerson writes that “it was the most popular of the novels with dramatic adapters and Victorian theatre-goers” (“\textit{Oliver Twist}” 83). That popularity has endured to the present day, as the number of film adaptations of \textit{Twist} produced in the twentieth century is just as staggering as the number of theatrical adaptations produced in Dickens’s age.

The visual appeal of Dickens’s text has not diminished over time, and, perhaps even more strikingly, our visual perceptions of his characters have not truly changed over the past hundred-and-seventy years either. The recent film version of \textit{Oliver Twist} (2005) directed by Roman Polanski is a feast for the eyes, and Polanski presents the characters of Fagin, Oliver, Bumble, and the Artful Dodger in all of their visual glory; Fagin is still bearded, shriveled, and hideous, and his fashion sense has not changed as he continues to sport fingerless gloves, a long, green coat, and a flat black hat; Oliver remains pathetic yet ethereally handsome even while clad in his drab, brown workhouse uniform; Bumble is still defined by his “parochial” outfit which serves to accentuate his plump pomposity; and the Dodger continues to dress in oversized clothes while sporting a tattered top hat. So rich and detailed are our visual
impressions of Dickens’s characters that bringing them to life on stage or screen seems natural, as everyone already knows how these unique individuals should look.

Given that there have been so many adaptations of *Oliver Twist*, the flaws and weaknesses of the original novel seem somehow inconsequential; far more significant is the legacy of the source, which is not something that can be confined to the limitations of the text itself. For certain, the primal appeal of the fundamental elements of *Oliver Twist* has transcended different visual mediums, time periods, cultures, and societies, but the emphases on different plot points and characters by various filmmakers and playwrights can help to reveal divergent trends in the approach to the story of Oliver and his companions. Each adaptation has likewise contributed to the amorphous cultural appreciation of the novel, and has thus helped to shape our current perceptions of the story. While the emphases may have shifted over the years, the underlying appeal of that same basic story and its characters remains unchanged.

To chronicle the entire history of *Oliver Twist* on stage and screen would be an all-consuming undertaking. Nevertheless, it is useful to examine a number of theatrical and film adaptations so as to ascertain what specific aspects of the original novel were the most popular and enduring in terms of the cultural impressions of the text leading up to the initial production of Lionel Bart’s *Oliver!* As in the case of *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens’s most popular work in other media, *Oliver Twist* has evolved while, paradoxically, remaining very much the same.

Early theatrical versions of *Oliver Twist* focused heavily on the melodramatic potential of the novel, for melodrama was one of the hallmarks of the Victorian stage. Though *Twist* is not necessarily Dickens’s most melodramatic novel, it does contain some highly
melodramatic scenes. Ironically, few of these scenes revolve around Oliver himself, who is not particularly melodramatic in the strictest sense of the term. This might seem a curious assertion given how much sympathy Oliver engenders, but, as George J. Worth asserts, there is a difference between pathos and melodrama: “This affecting display of passive suffering on the part of a child or other helpless person leads to pathos rather than melodramatic speech or melodramatic scenes, and Dickens makes copious use of pathos in *Oliver Twist*” (40). Stage melodrama often revolves around verbal confrontations between grandiloquent individuals, but Oliver is a quiet lad. He is not prone to making grand speeches, and when he does engage in verbal confrontations with the likes of Claypole, Fagin, or the Dodger, he does not use melodramatic rhetoric. His best-known line is not an over-the-top speech in which he outlines his feelings of neglect and starvation, but rather, a simple request: “Please, sir, I want some more” (12). The more fundamentally melodramatic scenes in *Oliver Twist* involve characters who exhibit the traditional verbosity associated with stage melodrama. Worth points out that Harry Maylie uses such an idiom when speaking about his love for Rose. Nancy also uses melodramatic speech when she protests Sikes and Fagin’s abuse of Oliver. Thus, Fagin’s comments about Nancy “acting beautifully” (126) are fairly ironic.

Though *Oliver Twist* does not abound with examples of traditional melodrama in the same way that *Nicholas Nickleby* does, the hack playwrights who adapted the novel for the stage in the Victorian era found ample materials from which to create scenes and situations that suited the conventions of stage melodrama. Dickens himself was clearly conscious of the dramatic possibilities of the novel, as he wrote to Frederick Yates of his own desire to someday create a stage version: “Supposing we arrange preliminaries to our mutual satisfaction, I propose to dramatize *Oliver* for the first night of next Season” (388). The young author was already
well aware of the fact that the pirating of his works for the stage was inevitable, as dramatic
versions of *Pickwick Papers* began appearing before Boz had even completed his first novel.
Fulkerson notes that Dickens was confident that history would not repeat itself, for there
were so many threads to *Twist* that it seemed impossible to imagine a playwright adapting the
novel for the stage before its completion: “But the novelist underestimated the ingenuity or at
least the gall of the adapters, for the novel’s dramatic career began…when the book was only
half-way through its twenty-four month serialization in *Bentley’s Miscellany*” (“Oliver
*Twist*” 83-84). In *Dickens Dramatized*, Philip Bolton lists multiple versions of the play as
having appeared on the stage in both Britain and America before the novel was complete.

It seems somewhat ironic that *Oliver Twist* has proved such a popular source for theatrical
and film adaptation given that the very first live-action version of the novel on record, *Oliver
Twist: A Burletta in Two Acts*, was an unmitigated disaster. This initial production premiered
at the St. James’s Theatre on March 27, 1838 (Bolton 109)—as noted, the novel was only
about halfway through its serialized run, a telling indication of the fact that the person behind
this particular stage adaptation was very interested in making a quick profit and decidedly
uninterested in remaining true to the author’s vision. Nevertheless, the play helped to set the
tone for some of the *Twist* adaptations that would follow, and many of the scenes dramatized
in this particular version would find their way into other adaptations of the novel.

The burletta opens with a scene between Mr. Bumble and Mrs. Corney, and nearly all of
the adaptations that would follow this particular stage version of *Twist* would feature similar
versions of the same scene. Through the dialogue between the two characters, it is revealed
that Oliver has already run away (in this case, from Mr. Gamfield as opposed to Mr.
Sowerberry). Thus, the early workhouse scenes from the original novel, including the
moment where Oliver asks for more gruel, are omitted. This exclusion would prove to be a hallmark of the Victorian stage adaptations of *Twist*.

Scene two depicts Oliver’s first meeting with the Artful Dodger, another moment from the novel that would prove popular with the playwrights who adapted *Twist* for the Victorian stage. Oliver’s introduction, which features the orphan reciting a hackneyed monologue, helps to reveal the melodramatic conventions of the Victorian theater, though the fact that audiences responded negatively to this particular adaptation suggests that even contemporary viewers had a limit to just how much sensationalism they were willing to ingest in a single evening: “Oh dear, I’m sure I’ve walked a long way, but anything rather than go to that horrid chimney sweep. But what shall I do to live? I must hope for the best. It will be hard indeed if I cannot live as well as I did in the workhouse. I think the water I drank at the last pump was quite as strong as the gruel they used to give us” (687). Oliver is quickly taken in by the Dodger, and the next two scenes play out similarly to the original novel: Oliver is brought to the thieves’ den to meet Fagin, introduced to the lifestyle of the gang, and ends up being accused of picking Brownlow’s pocket. The first act concludes with a scene set in Fang’s courtroom, a scene that would prove a popular ending point for the first act of several versions written in the Victorian period.

The second act reveals several of the problems the playwright faced in trying to create a theatrical adaptation of an unfinished novel. The first few scenes follow the text fairly closely: Fagin and Sikes recruit Nancy (who is only featured in one or two very short scenes) to help recapture Oliver, who is being treated very well at Brownlow’s house but who arouses suspicion in Mr. Grimwig. Nancy succeeds in bringing the boy back to the thieves’ den, where Fagin and Sikes plan on using him to assist in robbing a house. Instead of
Oliver’s being unwillingly recruited to assist in the “Chertsey job,” that is, the robbery of the Maylie house in the original novel, the intended target is now Mr. Brownlow’s house. The final scenes diverge significantly from the source, as Oliver succeeds in alerting Brownlow, Grimwig, Mrs. Bedwin, and Bumble—who is visiting the household—of Fagin’s plan. The police are summoned, and in the ensuing melee, Sikes accidentally shoots Fagin; as Sikes is arrested, Mr. Brownlow decides to let Oliver stay with him. The play ends with a monologue from Bumble: “And I’ll go back to the workhouse to make my report to the board. If I leave my little charge here I’m sure he’ll be in good hands and I hope that he may never see a poorhouse as long as he remains—and with this wish I consign to your kindly consideration” (707). Given the audience’s reaction to this particular adaptation, Bumble’s hopes for “kindly consideration” would prove woefully off track.

Both Malcolm Morley and Barry Duncan recount the disastrous results of this first recorded adaptation of *Oliver Twist*. Morley quotes the reviews from three different Victorian journals which labeled the piece “‘a very meager and dull affair and the sooner taken from the bills the better’;…‘a thing more unfit for any stage, except that of a Penny Theatre, we never saw’;…‘It was consigned by the audience to the lower depths of Tartarus’” (qtd. in Morley 75). Duncan’s text details the hostile reactions of the opening night audience who apparently “hissed and booed” when the stage manager announced a repeat engagement for later in the week (47). There have been numerous disagreements over who wrote this very first stage adaptation of *Twist*, but given the fact that the play was met with such hostile reactions, it is perhaps best that the circumstances surrounding the

8 In his text, Duncan seems to confuse the first production of *Oliver Twist* with the Almar version, as he writes that Dickens “is supposed to have been in front that night and to have become so angry that he hid below his box until it was over” (47). While there is every possibility that Dickens responded negatively to both versions, his negative reaction to the first part of the Almar version has been documented as fact.
adaptation remain obscure. Moreover, the question of authorship is less important than the issues surrounding the popularity of the novel as a source for Victorian stage drama. In spite of the burletta’s limitations, most of the scenes featured in the adaptation would find their way into other Twistian melodramas produced in the period. The regular recurrence of many of these scenes in the Victorian adaptations that followed reinforces the idea that the theatrical versions of Oliver Twist staged in this period were actually adaptations of adaptations, as opposed to mere adaptations of Dickens’s novel—a fact which is essential to understanding the concept of Twist as a culture text.

Two early examples of this trend include C.Z. Barnett’s adaptation, first staged in May 1838, and George Almar’s version, first staged in November of that same year. Though there are many noteworthy differences between the two adaptations, Barnett and Almar dramatize most of the same scenes from the novel and incorporate similar emotional highpoints into their stage versions. Furthermore, the two playwrights make use of the Victorian stage conventions of the tableau and incidental music, both of which were essential features of nineteenth-century melodrama. One particularly striking characteristic shared by both plays (and their infamous predecessor) is the omission of much of the social commentary from the original novel. In all three of these versions, the workhouse scenes are eliminated. As Fulkerson points out, the melodramatic component of the novel, when it is transferred from the text to the stage, “makes virtually no demands on the intellect, but excites the audience’s rudimentary emotion by its strong conflict between the clearly-marked forces of good and

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9 F. Dubrez Fawcett asserts that the St. James’s production was written by J.S. Coyne “a fertile writer of farces, and one of the founders of Punch” (54). In his doctoral dissertation, however, Fulkerson asserts that “Fawcett’s description of the play is one of the more flagrant examples of the inaccuracy with which the whole subject has been treated” (93) and speculates that the first version was probably written by Gilbert A. à Beckett—yet another founder of Punch. Fulkerson is even more forceful in his article “Oliver Twist in the Victorian Theatre,” where he insists that the first adaptation was written by à Beckett. The card catalogue for the Lord Chamberlain’s manuscripts collection at the British Library also lists à Beckett as the author, indicating that Fulkerson’s assertion has come to be regarded as accurate.
This is in contrast to the social satire, which is fundamentally intellectual. Consequently, the earliest live action versions of Dickens’s second novel revolved heavily around the affecting moments in the text and the arousing traits in the characters as opposed to the narrative and its topicality. Though the exclusion of the satirical elements is understandable, as these factors are far more suited to a textual medium, the scope of Twist is thus reduced significantly. In the hands of most of the hack playwrights who tried to adapt the novel for the Victorian stage, the story of little Oliver is one of a series of emotional climaxes as opposed to an exploration of the boundaries between poverty, crime, and middle-class morality. Dickens draws similar attention to Oliver’s trials in the novel, but for him, the pathetic figure of the suffering child is part of a larger project, and Oliver is ultimately used to serve several thematic and symbolic purposes throughout the story. In Barnett’s adaptation, Oliver is simply used to provoke an obvious response from the audience. The sufferings of characters like Oliver and Nancy in Dickens’s novel would undoubtedly have appealed to hack playwrights in that the potential for creating stage melodrama surrounding these characters seemed obvious. Almar likewise chooses to focus on the melodramatic potential within the text, incorporating some of the most histrionic (but simultaneously, more peripheral) scenes from the novel into his adaptation. The oft forgotten character of Little Dick is included, and Almar even goes so far as to fit in the scene with the hysterical man whose wife is measured for a coffin by Mr. Sowerberry. Though Almar’s version keeps more of the novel intact and follows the original storyline closely, here too the main focus is on emotional confrontations rather than narrative or theme.

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10 Paradoxically, the most inherently melodramatic characters from Dickens’s original novel, Rose and Harry, were rarely included in Victorian stage adaptations of Oliver Twist, though their excision is rather understandable given how late in the story they are introduced, and moreover, the general tediousness and inconsequentiality of their relationship. As Fulkerson notes, the two characters “were of little dramatic interest” (“Oliver Twist” 94).
Almar’s version was popular with audiences and financially successful, despite the fact that Dickens himself so loathed the adaptation that, “in the middle of the first scene, he laid himself down upon the floor in the corner of the box and never rose from it until the drop-scene fell” (Morley “Early Dramas” 78). Nevertheless, the Almar adaptation helped to set the tone for many of the versions which followed immediately. The fad wore out soon after, however, as Malcolm Morley notes that after the “first batch of early dramas, the novel was shown but little on the stage for the next sixteen years” (79). *Twist* was also supposedly kept off the boards for some time by William B. Donne, the examiner of plays. An article mentioning this controversy appeared in the *Leeds Intelligencer* in March 1868 and was later reprinted in an early issue of the *Dickensian*. This editorial reveals that “the Lord Chamberlain has interdicted the performance of the piece in London, although it has been allowed repeatedly, for several years past, elsewhere” (160). The anonymous writer expresses confusion over this censorship, as he labels *Twist* a highly moral story, and comes to the conclusion that the Lord Chamberlain most likely took exception to the portrayal of thieves and pickpockets, “this, we suppose, is the ground on which the veto is based, [which] seems preposterous, when it is considered that such characters are constantly being represented in dramas whose claim to morality, not to speak of literary and artistic merit, cannot be named in the same breath with any play faithfully conveying the ideas and incidents of Mr. Dickens’s novel” (160).¹¹ Fulkerson maintains that it was not the portrayal of the thieves’ den that offended the Lord Chamberlain, but rather, the depiction of Nancy’s murder, which supposedly had caused disturbances in several theaters patronized by

¹¹ The issue here is controversial, as Bolton maintains that the production of several versions of *Oliver Twist* in the 1840s seems to contradict the assertions of Fulkerson and others regarding the banning of the story from the Victorian stage in the decades following the initial string of productions: “The examiner of Plays may have inhibited such public displays of theft, etc., but he did not utterly prevent them” (117).
members of the lower classes (Novels 95). In spite of such issues as initial overexposure and censorship, *Oliver Twist* continued to dominate the stage in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

Comparing the earliest versions of *Oliver Twist* with those produced in the middle and later part of the nineteenth century can create a clear understanding of how the conventions of the Victorian theater evolved over time. Bolton catalogs such changes in his text:

The plays from *Oliver Twist* illustrate several developments in the history of the stage. They show the change from long productions with more than thirty scenes in the 1840s to shorter productions with only ten scenes in a 1909 production, for example. They show how the tableaux vivants, often derived from the original illustrations to the novel, were a convention that dwindled but survived through the years until the rise of the cinema. They emphasize a Victorian interest in women playing suffering children upon the stage that diminished toward the turn of the century but survived into the early days of the cinema. (105)

These are all interesting points, but a more pressing question in the context of this chapter is not whether or not the Victorian theater evolved, but rather, whether or not *Oliver Twist* evolved. In truth, the presentation of Oliver and his companions remained largely the same throughout the Victorian era. Many playwrights unsurprisingly patterned their own versions of the story on the earlier versions which had found success on the boards, including Almar’s highly profitable version. Thus, the culture text of *Twist* had already started to drift away from Dickens’s text; mid- and late nineteenth-century adaptations of the story were, in large part, adaptations of adaptations. As mentioned, many of the surviving manuscripts from the Victorian period indicate that these plays were virtual carbon copies of their predecessors in terms of the points in the original plot being dramatized. Chiefly, the text continued to serve as a source for melodrama—the ever-growing role of Nancy in some of these later versions of the novel highlights the melodramatic potential that playwrights saw in the character, as
her confrontations with Sikes and Fagin, along with her meetings with Rose and Brownlow, all contain the emotional highpoints necessary for melodramatic monologues.

Here it is important to note that Dickens himself had explored the melodramatic elements of the character of Nancy firsthand through his public readings, more specifically, the infamous “Sikes and Nancy” reading. This sensational performance of the murder of Nancy has entered Dickensian lore as one of the chief causes of Dickens’s untimely death, and whether or not this is merely a case of sensationalism breeding sensationalism is unimportant. Far more significant is the fact that Dickens compulsively performed the reading in spite of warnings from his doctors and succeeded in driving several audience members to the point of hysteria, much to his own delight. Clearly, he understood the power of the characters that he was portraying; it is little wonder that Nancy began to take on a more significant role in the culture text of *Oliver Twist*.

The most vital piece of information to emerge from these comparisons between the different Victorian versions of *Oliver Twist*, including Boz’s “Sikes and Nancy” reading, is the fact that the early culture text of *Twist* was built around a selective version of the story as opposed to the entire story as Dickens himself conceived it. As mentioned, Victorian playwrights viewed *Twist* as a source for melodramatic scenes that would entertain paying audiences. If the early culture text was shaped by the melodramatic tastes of the Victorian theater, the turn of the century allowed for new opportunities to shape the cultural perception of *Oliver Twist*, opportunities created through the innovative medium of film.

Given that Oliver’s story captured such interest throughout the nineteenth century, it is not surprising that the very end of this century saw the production of the very first film version of the novel, or, to be more specific, the very first film version of a scene from the novel. It is
even less surprising that this motion picture, the first film adaptation of a Dickens novel ever produced, was based on *Oliver Twist*: the most popular of Dickens’s novels with nineteenth-century adaptors. *The Death of Nancy Sykes* (1897) marked a new chapter in the culture text of *Twist*, though, as this title implies, the emphases were initially quite similar thanks to the influence of the stage melodrama, and more specifically, the tableau, on early silent films. Nevertheless, as the United States became the filmmaking capital of the world, changes to the presentation of Oliver and his friends were bound to occur.

Dickens is a particularly important case study in the concept of motion picture adaptation, for many film critics and scholars regard him as the most filmable novelist of all time. Brian McFarlane states that “Dickens has been the most often filmed of the classic authors” (105), and the extensive list of Dickensian film adaptations cataloged in both Bolton’s text and Michael Pointer’s *Charles Dickens on the Screen* corroborate his point. Perhaps even more impressive than Dickens’s longevity on the screen is his profound influence on the early pioneers of the motion picture. Boz’s novels served as an important inspiration to groundbreaking silent filmmaker D.W. Griffith, as Joss Marsh writes that Griffith cited Dickens “as formal inspiration (and justification) in every one of his major films” (221). In pioneering such film techniques as cross-cutting, Griffith was able to create a new variation on Dickens’s own practice of jumping back and forth between different storylines before wrapping up the entire piece in a stunning synthesis.

Griffith was hardly the only film pioneer to perceive the connections between Dickens and the cinema. Revolutionary film theorist Sergei Eisenstein “all but enshrined Dickens as the forefather of the cinematic narrative” (McFarlane 105). For certain, the sweeping plots,

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12 This alternative spelling of Sikes’s surname is fairly common in the innumerable stage and film adaptations of *Twist*. In the early versions of the libretto and score to *Oliver!*, Lionel Bart himself would utilize this spelling (see Chapter 2).
climactic cliffhangers, striking sensory descriptions, and memorable characters that Dickens created in his novels served as an inspiration to the early pioneers of the motion picture industry who were trying to create an engaging narrative through sight and sound. In his landmark essay, “Dickens, Griffith and Ourselves” (sometimes called “Dickens, Griffith and Film Today”), Eisenstein chronicles Dickens’s impact on Griffith’s films and techniques. Film conventions, such as the film montage “which played a vital role in Griffith’s works, and brought him his most glorious triumphs” (426), can be linked back to Dickens, who inspired Griffith to experiment with the practice of creating parallel action on film.

Eisenstein then proceeds to use examples from *Oliver Twist*, singling out the scenes which detail Oliver’s errand for Mr. Brownlow and his subsequent abduction by Nancy and Sikes. Just as Griffith cuts between different scenes and story arcs in his films, so does Dickens jump back and forth between the thieves’ den and Mr. Brownlow’s house, paralleling Oliver’s abduction with the increasing frustration and concern of Mr. Brownlow (430-433).

The film scholar also cites how Dickens’s description of various scenes in the novel, along with his meticulous attention to detail, place him in a position that parallels the standpoint of the filmmaker, who must be just as meticulous in setting up shots, inserts, and visual details. Clearly, the early artists of the filmmaking industry were able to appreciate the cinematic elements of Dickens’s writing style. The very first decade of the twentieth century witnessed the creation of numerous film versions of *Twist*, including such titles as *Mr. Bumble the Beadle, The Modern Oliver Twist: or the Life of a Pickpocket*, and at least three films simply entitled *Oliver Twist*.

It is important to realize, however, that the very first moving pictures adapted from Dickens’s novels were silent. Consequently, these motion pictures, while part of a
revolutionary art form, were based heavily on the Victorian tableau. Pointer discusses several of these films, most of which were under three minutes long, in the opening chapter to his text. Like many of the Victorian melodramas which utilized the convention of the tableau, these motion pictures were structured around the visual representation of the characters in dramatic situations. Even in this, the earliest stage in what would become a long history of film adaptations of Dickens, *Christmas Carol* and *Twist* were by far the most popular works amongst filmmakers (Pointer 21).

While the tradition of the tableau certainly prefigured the early film treatments of Dickens, there are sharp contrasts between the melodramatic stage adaptations of nineteenth-century Britain and the silent film adaptations of early twentieth-century America. The most obvious distinction relates to dialogue: melodrama revolves around long-windedness while silent films are limited to gesticulation. Nevertheless, these “limitations” did not inhibit the translation of Dickens into the film medium in spite of the loquacious characteristics of the author’s prose style. Unlike melodrama, however, film could be considered an inherently American art form which embodied the spirit of American innovation. Thus, the early film versions of Dickens’s novels were not only presented in a new medium, but likewise, in a different cultural context.

Hollywood is an American institution, but even before the rise of the studio system, film seemed intrinsically suited for American tastes. Paula Marantz Cohen analyzes the rise of silent film as a victory of the “American myth,” labeling Thomas Edison as the messiah that Ralph Waldo Emerson had prophesied when he wrote of the desire for a uniquely American form of literature (27-33). She qualifies this statement by noting that “film became a true heir to literature only when it escaped Edison’s control and came into the hands of immigrant
entrepreneurs like Carl Laemmle, William Fox, Marcus Loew, and Adolph Zukor” (35). The fact that these immigrants were able to attain such success through this exciting new medium underscores what Cohen means by the “American myth.” In addition, given the newness of film as a narrative medium, the possibilities for a break from European traditions now seemed endless: “Silent film redressed the balance that had plagued nineteenth-century American writers in their relationship to Europe. It turned the deficits of the new American nation into advantages and realized in cultural terms the idea of ‘beginning the world again,’ which had been central to the American myth” (Cohen 41). America’s cultural youthfulness and pioneering spirit made it the perfect testing ground for this new form of art.

If film was, from an early age, perceived as an American art-form, it was also American in its democratic appeal. Working-class Americans quickly became the main audience for early silent films. Steven J. Ross writes that “film scholars have debated when middle-class people first started going to the movies, but it is clear that workers and their families composed the bulk of the movie-going population before World War I” (19). Since ticket prices were so cheap, movies were an excellent source of entertainment for the lower orders, and the escapism that silent films offered was a great source of pleasure to those on the bottom rungs of the economic ladder. In this context, it is little wonder that Charles Chaplin’s “Little Tramp” character was so popular with audiences. *The Oxford History of World Cinema* notes that “in the 1910s and 20s, Chaplin’s Tramp, combating a hostile and unrewarding world with cheek and gallantry, afforded a talisman and champion to the underprivileged millions who were the cinema’s first mass audience” (Nowell-Smith 85). Chaplin’s ability to combine slapstick comedy with poignant social commentary without even uttering a word is a testament to his brilliance.
Chaplin is an important figure to consider in detail regarding the translation of Dickens, and more specifically, *Oliver Twist*, to film in the early years of the cinema, for not only did Chaplin capture key elements of Dickens’s narrative technique in his performance style, but he endured a childhood just as painful as any Dickensian orphan. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith briefly summarizes Chaplin’s early life in the *Oxford History of World Cinema*:

Chaplin’s first ten years had witnessed more tribulation than most human beings ever encounter in long life-times. His father, a moderately successful singer on the London music halls—apparently exasperated by his wife’s infidelities—abandoned his family, and succumbed to alcoholism and early death. His mother, a less successful music hall artist, intermittently struggled to maintain Charles and his half-brother Sydney. As her health and mind broke down—she was eventually permanently confined to mental hospitals—the children spent extended periods in public institutions. By his tenth year, Charles Chaplin was familiar with poverty, hunger, madness, drunkenness, the cruelty of the poor London streets and the cold impersonality of public institutions. (84)

This brief summary seems purposefully Dickensian in its narrative style, though the Dickensian elements are obvious even without Nowell-Smith’s embellishments—like Oliver Twist himself, the young Chaplin was forced to endure life in a workhouse. It is little wonder that a boy who suffered such tragedy and abuse would be drawn to the world of Dickens, and Chaplin was certainly an admirer of Boz’s work. In his autobiography, Chaplin recounts having seen the eminent music-hall performer Bransby Williams perform in some of his Dickensian roles, and how these performances drew him, even at an early age, toward Dickens’s texts:

Bransby Williams, the Dickens delineator, enthralled me with imitations of Uriah Heep, Bill Sykes [sic], and the old man of *The Old Curiosity Shop*. The legerdemain of this handsome, dignified young man, making up before a rowdy Glasgow audience and transforming himself into these fascinating characters, opened up another aspect of the theatre. He also ignited my curiosity about literature; I wanted to know what was this immured mystery that lay hidden in books—these sepia Dickens characters that moved in such a strange Cruikshankian world. (48)

Unsurprisingly, the first Dickens novel that Chaplin took up was *Oliver Twist*, a novel that he
would read and reread many times (Marsh 219). Marsh asserts that Chaplin’s film persona was fundamentally Dickensian, a “filmic self-representation as a grown-up lost child [which] was sanctified by identification with Dickens’s Oliver and Artful Dodger” (219). Indeed, the Dickensian element within Chaplin’s work is so overt that Cohen spends little time discussing Chaplin in her text. This is due in part to the fact that Chaplin was a British performer, but more important is his performance style, which was evocative of traditional British methods of storytelling: “His English roots and his Dickensian sensibility make him less connected to the American myth as I define it” (19). Nevertheless, there is no discounting that Chaplin’s style of presentation and narrative technique struck a chord with American audiences.

As a silent film star in the early days of the cinema, Chaplin worked in an American medium; however, his performance style was shaped by his training in Britain. Furthermore, the narratives of his films were influenced by elements from British literary traditions, including Dickens. An understanding of this combination is helpful in tracking the evolving culture text of Oliver Twist. Chaplin’s The Kid (1921) is an especially important film to consider in this context. Though it is not an outright adaptation of Oliver Twist, the Dickensian elements at work within this film are fairly obvious. Moreover, Chaplin’s young costar Jackie Coogan would go on to play the titular character in a silent film adaptation Oliver Twist just one year later.

In the Amazon.com product review for the DVD release of The Kid, Robert Horton writes that the wrenching scene in which the child is forcibly separated from the tramp is “probably

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13 Cohen contrasts Chaplin with Harold Lloyd: “Both Chaplin’s and Lloyd’s plot lines were derived from literary sources. Chaplin’s is the Dickensian plot of the little but virtuous man struggling against an oppressive system; it draws on the sentimentality of Victorian melodrama and fiction. Lloyd’s plot is related to the dime novels of the turn of the century, epitomized in the Horatio Alger stories that focused on hard work as the key to success” (63).
the most Dickensian sequence ever captured on film” (par. 1). Hyperbole aside, Chaplin manages to attain a near perfect balance between comedy, pathos, and sentiment in this film, and the end result is indeed Dickensian, and, more specifically, Twistian. Marsh comments on these elements in his essay:

…the film as a whole is structured around (like Twist) by yearning for the lost mother, and even includes a highly cinematic chase sequence (reminiscent of Sikes’s final flight) across the rooftops. Rescued from the refuse strewn streets, the orphaned and outcast Kid is taught Charlie’s crooked tricks with the gas-meter, plate-glass windows, etc. He is even glimpsed sitting up in bed—like Dickens’s Dodger, and dressed in the same miniaturized mannish outfit….Chaplin plays the Kid’s volunteer father as a benign Fagin, his garret as an anarchic haven of all-male domesticity. (219-220)

Marsh’s points are well-made, though his comparison of the kid to the Artful Dodger should not obscure the fact that the child’s origins (and later, his happy ending) are highly analogous to those of Oliver Twist. Marsh’s linking of the tramp to Fagin, even a “benign Fagin,” is thus inaccurate. Fagin may provide his pupils with protection, and perhaps even care, but his actions are always exploitative. In The Kid, while the tramp teaches his young charge the ways of the street and gets him to help out with his small-time scams, there is never a sense that he is exploiting or manipulating the child for his own ends. Though the parallels between the child and the Artful Dodger are noteworthy, the tramp himself is far more comparable to the Dodger than he is to Fagin. Early on in the film, the tramp is introduced in a similar manner to the Dodger: he wears clothing that fits him awkwardly, he comports himself in an unusual manner, and, most amusingly, he affects an air of gentility in spite of society’s perceptions of him, fiddling with his gloves and poring over his choice of cigar and cigarette butts (which he keeps in a neat little case). The tramp’s cons, which involve the smashing and replacement of window panes, are quite harmless when compared to any of Fagin’s activities in Twist, and the tramp’s ability to successfully “dodge” the police and the
other citizens who try to make trouble for him is perhaps the ultimate link between the Chaplin character and Dickens’s Jack Dawkins. Thus, instead of a Fagin/Dodger relationship, the film presents a Dodger/Oliver relationship that gradually evolves into a Dodger/Dodger relationship as the child learns how to survive in the street. Toward the end of the film, the kid re-transitions from the Dodger to Oliver, as he is reunited with his upper-class family, and the elevation of the tramp is sure to follow as he is invited by the boy’s mother to come and live with them. Like Oliver Twist, the tramp and the kid have achieved their storybook ending, and it involves a rise in social status.

Though *Oliver Twist* had already been adapted for film several times before the release of *The Kid*, Chaplin’s movie helped pave the way for two of the more important film adaptations that would follow. This was encouraged by the fact that young Jackie Coogan, who made his film debut opposite Chaplin in *The Kid*, immediately became a sensation with audiences in the United States and Europe, and rapidly evolved into one of America’s first child stars. Coogan’s very next film, *Oliver Twist* (1922), directed by Frank Lloyd, shows a definite Chaplinesque influence, particularly regarding the portrayal of the titular character. There is much to admire in this particular adaptation, though the performance given by Jackie Coogan as Oliver is arguably the most engaging and culturally interesting element of the silent film.

Coogan’s Oliver is not a passive, pathetic child, but rather, a spunky and precocious “kid” who has seemingly maintained the lessons taught to him by Chaplin in the previous film. Throughout the movie, Coogan manages to steal scenes from the older, more experienced actors simply by adopting the same kind of savvy and charm exhibited by Chaplin’s tramp. When he is pressured into going up to ask for more gruel, Coogan’s Oliver humorously stalls
for as long as possible, meticulously finishing all the gruel in his bowl and annoying his fellow orphans as he postpones the inevitable. In the same scene, when the outraged master grabs hold of the rebellious Oliver and shrieks for Mr. Bumble, Oliver subtly helps himself to more gruel from the ladle in the master’s hand, happily indulging in a second helping even as he knows he is going to be punished. The furious master begins to toss Oliver about angrily, and indeed, Coogan gets knocked around quite a lot in this film—his tiny frame allows the actors playing Bumble, Claypole, and Sikes to easily lift him up off the ground and shake him. All of this violence is always presented in a very humorous fashion, and once again, the influence of Chaplin is undeniable. Like the tramp, Oliver gets knocked about but is never actually hurt. Even after he is shot by Sikes during the botched Chertsey robbery, there is no indication of permanent injuries and Oliver seems just fine in the very next scene. The incorporation of slapstick humor marks a clear departure from the Victorian adaptations of Twist, which emphasized melodramatic speech as opposed to comic physicality. This same physicality helps define Coogan’s performance.

As in The Kid, Coogan displays a true talent for mimicry, and his replication of the movements of the other actors and characters adds to the charm of his representation. Indeed, Coogan’s performance is so engaging that there are moments where one wonders if the film was truly conceived of as a Dickensian adaptation, or rather, as a vehicle for its young star who was rapidly becoming one of the biggest box office draws in the country. Since this is a silent film, the issue of British accents is not important, but even without speaking, Coogan comes across more as the all-American boy-next-door rather than the pathetic workhouse orphan of the Victorian era. Moreover, the spunk that Coogan incorporates into his performance instills Oliver with an American energy. If Dickens’s
Oliver is the fairy-tale hero who is elevated because of his true birthright, Coogan’s Oliver is more a product of the American dream. While he does not work hard at a career to rise in social status, he does embody the impetuous spirit that is so vital to the dream; clearly, such a character would have resonated with working-class audiences who were eager to see the little guy (like Chaplin’s tramp) come out on top.

The Americanness of Coogan is a point of contention for Pointer, who asserts that the young child star seemed a more likely candidate to play characters like Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn as opposed to Oliver Twist (45). He also cites a *New York Times* review that praised the film while simultaneously asserting that it was difficult to determine whether it was Dickens or Coogan who was drawing audiences to the movie (46). This is not to say that the motion picture is unfaithful to Dickens’s text. Lloyd’s film includes a great many obscure elements of the original novel, including the Monks subplot, the Chertsey robbery, and even the death of Sikes’s dog, Bullseye. Nevertheless, the overall tone of the film is decidedly different from the tone of the Victorian melodramas that were adapted from *Twist*.

Here then is another distinct shift in the culture text of *Oliver Twist* as it was adopted and adapted by American filmmakers: Oliver becomes a more central and engaging character than either his novelistic counterpart or the melodramatic incarnations of the orphan that dominated the Victorian stage. One might go so far as to say that this Oliver seems a precursor to the members of “Our Gang” and the “Little Rascals” who would dominate several early American family films. In a sense, Coogan’s popularity helped to shape the culture text of *Twist* during this period, as his incarnation of the character, which emphasized America’s growing fondness for watching precocious children on film, set the stage for
several of the film adaptations that would follow, notably, the earliest talkie version: a 1933 film directed by William J. Cowen.

The 1933 American film adaptation of *Oliver Twist* directed by Cowen picks up where the Lloyd version left off in that it takes the American elements of the earlier movie much further. This Oliver is so thoroughly American, so fundamentally the “little rascal,” that the entire story changes as a result. It is appropriate to mention “Our Gang” here, as the young Dickie Moore, no more than seven or eight years old when he began work on the film, had already appeared in several “Our Gang” shorts. As in the case of Coogan, the 1933 version of *Oliver Twist* fits in with the trend of releasing films starring cute kids in early American cinema.

The central problem with this approach is that the “Our Gang” sketches were based around the filming of American kids who were acting like American kids. Though Coogan’s Americanness never proves truly distracting thanks to his natural charisma and excellent supporting cast, Moore is so fundamentally American in both his idiom and manner that the film immediately loses all credibility. This is partially due to the limitations of the child’s acting abilities. It is obvious that young Moore is having a grand old time making this film, as he repeatedly smiles at the camera during the workhouse scenes, unintentionally breaking the fourth wall. Moore never transitions from this “Our Gang” style of acting—one would half-expect him to utter “gee whiz!” during some of his scenes. Here, we see the culture text moving further away from its source, as the story becomes more Americanized and sentimentalized. At the end of the film, when Fagin is sent to Newgate, the nauseatingly cute Moore mutters: “Poor Mr. Fagin, won’t they forgive him?” For certain, this film represents the worst tendencies in the Dickensian adaptation process when it is undertaken by
Americans: all of the darkness, sophistication, and drama of the original text are sacrificed in favor of cuteness and sentimentality.

Equally unsettling is the way in which the film was marketed. In her sourcebook on *Oliver Twist*, Juliet John includes snippets from the pressbook that was released to promote the movie. Studio distributors were advised to exploit the marketability of Dickens’s characters, most specifically Dickie Moore’s Oliver, through product placement (106-107). John includes descriptions of product tie-ins such as chocolates and milk, both of which were promoted around the idea of Oliver’s asking for more. It is worth noting that these companies were hardly the first organizations to cash in on the marketability of the image of Oliver Twist asking for more; the very creation of *Oliver!* years later was due in part to such a marketing strategy (see Chapter 2). Nevertheless, the 1933 adaptation reveals another American characteristic of the Dickensian adaptation process: marketability. Just as the 1922 film was helped immeasurably by the presence of Coogan, who was rapidly becoming a major box office star, the 1933 film tapped into the marketing trends of the 30s while simultaneously allowing the film to be utilized for the promotion of other products.

The Cowen adaptation of *Oliver Twist* is the kind of film that Jeff Richards warns against in his book. The movie exploits Dickens and his legacy, and the Englishness of the author is excised completely from the adaptation. It is little wonder that the very next major film version of the novel would mark such a tremendous departure from the trend started by the Americans, as one of England’s greatest directors sought to reclaim *Twist* for Dickens and the British.

David Lean’s *Oliver Twist* (1948) is the single most important adaptation of the novel leading up to Lionel Bart’s *Oliver!* *Oliver Twist* was not Lean’s first foray into the process
of Dickensian adaptation, however; his *Great Expectations* (1945) is regarded as a masterpiece of British cinema, and it remains perhaps the best-loved Dickensian film adaptation of all time. Like Griffith and Eisenstein, Lean perceived the cinematic qualities of Dickens and was able to make use of these qualities when translating the works from text to film.\(^{14}\) Pointer draws several interesting parallels between Lean and Dickens himself in this regard: “In the role of storyteller, David Lean had a marked affinity with Dickens and possessed similarly exceptional craftsmanship. All the aspects of filmmaking—camerawork, editing, the sparing use of background music and sound effects—are employed with masterly skill in advancing the narrative” (67). Lean’s innovative cinematic techniques, along with this central focus on the terrors of childhood as depicted through his representation of Pip in *Great Expectations*, would both go on to serve him well in his second great Dickensian adaptation.

*Oliver Twist*, like *Great Expectations*, is one of Dickens’s darkest novels, and criminality is a central issue in both texts. *Oliver Twist* addresses this subject more directly, however, by focusing on an entire society of criminals. Therefore, Lean conceived of *Twist* as an even darker film than *Great Expectations*: “Lean’s film would be a sordid tale of social evils involving underprivileged urchins, squalid workhouses, and rampant crime. Harsh, and characterized by brutish violence and a host of rapacious characters, it would be light years away from the kind of starchy costume pageants that other directors had often made of Dickens’s works” (Phillips 123). Both of Lean’s Dickensian adaptations captured the melancholy spirit of 1940s England, and *Oliver Twist* in particular reflected the brutality of a new worldview that was forever tainted by the unparalleled devastation of World War II.

\(^{14}\) Phillips writes that “Lean turned to Dickens because, as Eisentstein maintained, the novelist appeared to have a definite affinity for film” (102).
The culture text of *Twist* thus began to shift away from the cheery and sentimental tone of the American films of the 20s and 30s.

In their biographies of the great director, Stephen M. Silverman and Kevin Brownlow chronicle Lean’s painstaking approach to adapting *Twist*. The director was determined to make sure every part of the film fit his vision. For example, while Dickens’s novel opens in a rather abstract way so as to introduce the satirical tone of the narrator’s voice, the opening to Lean’s film is both concrete and stirring as the beleaguered and very pregnant Agnes makes her way to the workhouse gates—it is a haunting image that would be reused by numerous adaptors in the decades following Lean’s film, thus underscoring Lean’s influence on the culture text of *Twist*. Lean’s meticulousness shines through in virtually every scene. Not only does the director utilize clever film techniques to tell Oliver’s story, but he also does an admirable job of trying to take us into the minds of the characters without the use of narrative text. Examples of such bold experimentation on the part of the director can be seen throughout this motion picture adaptation: from the disorienting POV shots used in Magistrate Fang’s courtroom so as to convey Oliver’s lightheaded sickness, to the dark flashbacks utilized when Mrs. Corney recaps her story to Monks. Ultimately, Lean does an excellent job of capturing the hallucinatory effect of the novel on film. Some moments in the movie leave the viewer feeling just as disoriented as little Oliver.

As a British filmmaker working with a British source, Lean was able to reshape the cultural perceptions of *Oliver Twist* and move away from the cheery and sentimentalized perceptions of the early American film versions. Though Lean does present Oliver as the lead character, as in the Coogan and Moore films, his impressions of the character are far bleaker. The young actor cast in the role of Oliver, John Howard Davies, won the part
through “happy accident” (Brownlow 235), though his Oliver marked a departure from the Olivers of the early American cinema. Pale and thin, yet still handsome and sympathetic, Davies’s Oliver is much more in keeping with the character presented in Dickens’s novel—when he is first introduced on screen, he immediately comes across as miserable, lonely, pathetic, and yet, sympathetic. There is none of Coogan’s spunk nor Moore’s sweetness in Davies’s performance, as neither of these qualities would fit the tenor of the film. As Gene D. Phillips astutely notes, Lean gives Oliver relatively few lines in the script (129). Rather, Davies’s performance is built around reaction, specifically, facial reactions to what is transpiring before him. It is safe to say that Davies conveys more of the character’s vulnerability through his expressive eyes than many Victorian performers could have conveyed through their melodramatic monologues, though the power of the cinema is essential here, as Lean was able to utilize close-ups and POV shots to emphasize these elements of Oliver’s character. As in the case of Lean’s *Great Expectations*, much of the story is told from the young protagonist’s perspective, and the audience thus experiences the vulnerability of childhood firsthand.

But what of the most controversial element of Lean’s film: Alec Guinness’s portrayal of Fagin? Here again is a critical element for consideration regarding the culture text of *Twist*: how does one deal with Fagin in a world that has become increasingly sensitive to issues of anti-Semitism, particularly in light of the unspeakable horrors of the Holocaust? It seems hard to believe that a man of Lean’s intelligence would have failed to take into account just how severe the accusations of anti-Semitism against his film would be, yet various accounts show that the director felt rather blindsided by the controversy that the film engendered. Clearly, artistic vision surpassed political correctness in the conception and execution of this
particular adaptation. As John points out, “the fact that Lean’s adaptation, like his brilliant
*Great Expectations* (1946), is rated by some as one of the best films ever made, suggest
somewhat problematically that Lean did more for the reputation of film in 1948 than for
harmonious race relations” (100). Here, the issue of the culture text as it was shaped by both
British and American filmmakers and playwrights comes once more to the forefront.

Up until the point that Lean began work on *Twist*, the 1933 Cowen film was the only
sound adaptation in existence. Unsurprisingly, the film had received negative reviews in
England upon its initial release (Phillips 125). Nevertheless, the distributors “decided to steal
Lean’s thunder by re-releasing it in 1947” (Phillips 125). Lean himself sat through a private
screening of the film and was keenly aware of its flaws, though the poor performances and
low production values may have been of less concern to the great director than the
Americanized tone of the film. Marsh, who is highly critical of Lean’s depiction of Fagin in
the film, argues that the reason the director was willing to incorporate such a distasteful
element into his movie is that he was bent on returning the story to its (British) roots: “What
is clear…is that in striving to reclaim a British text from its American usurpers, by all
‘authentic means possible’…Lean committed an act of unthinking anti-Semitism” (218). In
the case of Lean’s Fagin, fidelity and truthfulness in the translation of text to screen clearly
eclipses sensitivity. Fagin is a despicable character in the original novel and a terrifying
figure in Cruickshank’s illustrations; Guinness’s Fagin is an unwaveringly faithful (if
unquestionably indelicate) portrayal of the Dickensian villain.

The central problem with Lean’s fidelity to Boz’s vision is that while Dickens refers to
Fagin as “the Jew” very frequently throughout his novel, he does not draw explicit attention
to Fagin’s Jewishness. In “Dickens and the Jews,” Harry Stone points out that Fagin does
not possess most of the stereotypical traits assigned to Jews in fiction and onstage, as he “has no lisp, dialect, or nasal intonation….And Fagin goes through no act, ritual, or pattern which identifies him as a Jew” (233). As a result of the changes necessitated by moving from a textual medium to a visual and auditory one, the Guinness version of Fagin embodies many repulsive stereotypes: Guinness sports a large prosthetic nose, utilizes a heavy lisp in his dialogue, and speaks with a conspicuously Yiddish accent and inflection. Guinness later defended his performance by asserting that Fagin is never actually called a Jew in the film and describing his impressions of the villain as “just some curious Middle Eastern character in the East End” (qtd. in Brownlow 245). Nevertheless, many people could not help but perceive Fagin as an unflattering and inflammatory Jewish caricature.

Even before the film’s release, Lean had been cautioned about the dangers of presenting Fagin. Phillips notes that Joseph Ignatius Breen, an American film industry censor, had warned that the portrayal of Fagin should not in any way prove offensive to a specific racial group. This was obviously an allusion to Fagin as Dickens’s Jewish villain” (129). Lean persistently refused to heed this warning, and when makeup artist Stewart Freeborn inquired as to whether they should “tone down” the hooked nose that had been created for Guinness, Lean’s response was: “To hell with them!’…referring to Breen and his board” (Phillips 129). Lean paid the price for his stubbornness, however. In the United States, representatives of the Anti-Defamation League and the American Board of Rabbis condemned the film as being anti-Semitic and thus impeded its premiere in America. When the movie was finally released in the United States in 1951, it was an edited version in

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15 Here, Stone does not mention Fagin’s red hair, which is indeed a traditional trait associated with the Jewish stage villain, though he would mention it in his article on the fairytale roots of Oliver Twist.
which several of Fagin’s scenes, including the pickpocketing game and the scene in which he pores over his treasures, had been removed.\textsuperscript{16}

In Germany, the situation was even more volatile. Demonstrators rioted to prevent the film from being shown, and several people were injured in the violence that followed (Brownlow 247). An article in a 1949 issue of the \textit{Daily Telegraph} describes the explosive situation:

Fewer than 100 Polish Jews, many of whom are known to the Berlin police as black market operators, again stopped the show at a British sector cinema here to-day of the British film “Oliver Twist.” They staged a demonstration outside the cinema, in the course of which German police made baton charges, used a fire hose, and fired warning shots from revolvers. Jews yesterday forced a withdrawal of the film in protest at the portrayal of Fagin in what they regard as a role discreditable to Jews….Several of the demonstrators received head wounds from truncheon blows. A number of policemen were also injured. (1)

This is arguably the most extreme example of controversy caused by any adaptation of \textit{Oliver Twist}, and perhaps the most fascinating question raised here is why the story continued to be adapted for film after precipitating such an outburst. No matter what the cause, the culture text of \textit{Twist} continues to evolve, and the issue of Fagin’s Jewishness continues to haunt many writers and directors long after the ghosts of Lean’s adaptation have been exorcised.

In spite of (or perhaps because of) all of its controversy, the Lean film has transformed our cultural memory of \textit{Oliver Twist} to the extent of shaping nearly every adaptation of the novel that has followed. Lionel Bart borrowed very heavily from the Lean film in organizing the plot of \textit{Oliver!}, and many other adaptors of the novel have patterned the structure of the story around Lean’s memorable version. Some directors have gone so far as to duplicate actual shots from the Lean film in their own adaptations. What’s more, the finale to the Lean

\textsuperscript{16} Lean later argued that by taking out the humorous scenes involving Fagin’s interaction with the boys, the censors had, ironically, made the film even more anti-Semitic by portraying only his negative qualities (Silverman 78).
adaptation has eclipsed Dickens’s own conclusion in the popular memory of the story, as Lean’s film presents a more exciting (and decidedly more coherent) climax to Oliver’s adventures. Lean leaves Oliver’s fate undecided until the very end of the adaptation, and the climax atop the roof of Fagin’s lair is breathtaking. Putting questions of quality aside, however, there is absolutely no doubt that the Lean film is the standard against which almost all films based on *Oliver Twist* are measured. Indeed, the complaint of many critics against certain recent adaptations of the novel is that the filmmakers have tamed the source material, as opposed to Lean who was willing to risk controversy for the sake of a genuine artistic vision.\(^{17}\)

These critical debates regarding the depiction of both Oliver and Fagin would prove essential to the critical discussion over Lionel Bart’s *Oliver!* as Bart undertook the difficult task of reconciling a spunky and precocious Oliver (evocative of the American versions of the character) with Lean’s dark outline of Dickens’s story, and moreover, with an unquestionably creative re-imagining of Fagin. The only adaptation of *Oliver Twist* that has arguably exerted more of an influence on the culture text of the novel than Lean’s adaptation is *Oliver!* itself, though Bart willingly acknowledged his debt to Lean’s film for providing him with the inspiration to write the show. The legacy of *Oliver Twist* in other media and the evolving nature of the culture text is a central issue in analyzing the emergence of *Oliver!*

The other crucial component in this analysis relates to yet another legacy: that of the British musical. *Oliver!* emerged at a time when the British musical, following a period of inactivity, seemed in danger of extinction due in large part to the popularity of American

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\(^{17}\) In her sourcebook, John notes that both the Clive Donner version of *Oliver Twist* (1982) and the later Alan Bleasdale adaptation (1999) would come under scrutiny for the exact opposite reason that the Lean film was so heavily criticized: they were overly sensitive and far too concerned with being politically correct. I would argue, however, that these versions of the story are simply engaging the more family-friendly version of the culture text that emerged following the release of *Oliver!* (see Chapters 3 and 4).
musicals in the West End. Bart’s adaptation of Twist proved revolutionary, for not only did it take the British musical to bold new places, but it simultaneously marked one of the first instances in which an English musical was able to attain great success on Broadway. As in the case of the evolution of the Oliver Twist culture text, the movement toward Oliver!, the groundbreaking British musical, was gradual.

It seems almost impossible to accept that Britain fell behind the United States in the development of modern musical theater given the fact that the comic operas of Gilbert and Sullivan, works which heavily prefigured the emergence of the modern musical, were fundamentally British. Oddly enough, however, Gilbert and Sullivan did not truly inspire other British composers to pick up where they had left off. The success of comic operas like HMS Pinafore and The Pirates of Penzance in the United States, when coupled with the American spirit of institutions such as the revue show, helped set the stage for the emergence of the integrated American musical in the 1930s and 1940s. In Britain, “Gilbert and Sullivan were largely followed up by Gilbert and Sullivan” (Ganzl Musical 84). By the early part of the twentieth century, British musical theater was already being dominated by musical trends from other cultures. Ganzl writes that as early as the 1920s, most of the new British musicals being produced in the West End were basically “imitations of foreign shows—American or Continental” (Musical 194). Sheridan Morley echoes this sentiment, asserting that “the shows that came to us from New York for the first half of this century were much more energetic, more enthusiastic than the shows born here, and that did not just start from Oklahoma! As early as the turn of the century, home-grown musicals had settled into a tasteful kind of calm from which they had to be regularly jolted by occasional glimpses of how these things were done on the other side of the Atlantic” (Spread 29). By the 1920s, a
full two decades before *Oklahoma!* debuted in England, the American invasion was already well underway. Tellingly, the canon of classic musicals from the golden age of the genre, which contains countless musicals that are continuously revived today, includes very few musicals of British origin. John Snelson notes that “between 1935 and 1960, 127 new British musicals were presented in the West End, but only a handful have survived into today’s active repertory….So what happened to all of the other shows? Why did most of them never receive more than one original professional production? Were they really so bad as to be better forgotten or did other factors lead to their neglect?” (101). In truth, this imbalance has little to do with quality. Rather, the disparity is the result of such issues as cultural trends, historical incidents, and various other factors beyond the control of any group of composers, lyricists, or librettists. During the formative years of the musical genre, that is, the 1920s and 30s, and likewise, during the golden age of the genre, that is, the 1940s and 50s, the American musical took hold in a way that the British musical could not.

This is not to say that Britain lacked any sort of musical tradition of its own. The two names that most dominated the British musical in the first half of the twentieth century were Noël Coward and Ivor Novello, and the works of these two men can be linked together by the influence that the tradition of the operetta had on the both of them. While both men succeeded in achieving great success in Britain as writers of musicals, neither one was able to attain any lasting transatlantic fame in this genre—a contrast to many of the American writers whose shows were embraced in both the United States and Britain. Furthermore, the legacy of their musicals is somewhat limited. Today, Coward is most remembered for his straight plays and revues, and many of Novello’s works have faded into obscurity. Unfortunately, the tradition of the operetta prevented the British musical from modernizing.
Richard Traubner labels Coward “the legitimate successor to Sullivan” (339) and praises the wittiness of his lyrics. Coward first attained fame as a writer of comedies and musical revues as opposed to operettas, though he went on to attain great success in this genre thanks to the triumph of *Bitter-Sweet* (1929). Ganzl writes that “*Bitter-Sweet* was as much of a surprise as *Show Boat* had been. Whereas the American romantic musical had sprung from the pen of a man wholly known to date as the composer of sprightly, dance-rhythmic songs and popular ballads, the British one came—words, lyrics and music—from the hands of one best known for some of the wittiest and cleverest revues and comedies of his time” (*Musical 194*). Ganzl goes on to point out that *Bitter-Sweet* broke with many of the conventions of the operetta in that it did not cast a baritone in the lead part, nor did it incorporate a ballet. Nevertheless, *Bitter-Sweet* shows a decidedly continental influence; most of the songs sung throughout the show are operatic ballads. In contrast to the American musical, Coward’s operetta does not feature a truly integrated score, but this is in keeping with the tradition from which the author is writing; most of the songs are used to open up scenes and establish settings, while several of the numbers sung within scenes are diegetic. At its core, *Bitter-Sweet* is a traditional tragic love story; Morley highlights the links between *Bitter-Sweet* and the continental operetta, claiming that “Noël’s first and most successful venture into the world of the nostalgic musical was in fact a lavish return, in three acts and six scenes, to the Viennese past, and it presents Coward at his closest to Ivor Novello” (*Spread 54-55*). While Coward was certainly moving the British musical forward, the new product was still heavily connected to the traditions of the past.

Perhaps the most striking quality of Coward’s piece is the language, particularly when one considers the kind of shows that Lionel Bart would go on to write. Nearly all of the
characters speak and sing in a sophisticated, droll, and beautiful idiom. This would prove to be a distinct difference between the works of Coward and those of Bart, who was willing to use street language, slang, and Cockney wit in both his dialogue and his lyrics. While there is a good deal of focus on class issues in *Bitter-Sweet*, Coward never presents a genuine representation of the lower-classes: the “Ladies of Town” speak and sing in just as sophisticated language as the upper-crust ladies of high society. Even the boisterous drinking song “Tokay,” featured in the play’s second act, contains tremendous lyricism and refinement: “When the thoughts of a man incline/To the grapes of a sunlit vine/On the banks of the golden Rhine/Slowly ripening pure and fine” (149). Clearly this is not the kind of melody one thinks of when one imagines what a “drinking song” should sound like, but the operatic quality of Coward’s song is again in keeping with the tenor of the piece—Bart would adopt a completely different style of music and lyricism for his own drinking song, “Oom-pah-pah,” which opens the second act of *Oliver!* Though the operetta was perceived as a bourgeois form of entertainment in comparison to the upper-class opera, the urbane characters and stylish lyrics featured in many of Coward’s musicals are leagues removed from the down-to-earth presentation in many early American musicals such as *Oklahoma!* Obviously, the cultural and historical differences must be taken into account here, but, as will be discussed in subsequent chapters, Bart’s ability to shift the focus of the British musical from the upper bourgeoisie world of the operetta to the low-class world of the London streets created a new phenomenon in British musical theater.

Novello’s works are comparable to Coward’s in several ways, and Traubner claims that Novello “represents British operetta of the most spectacularly romantic type, proving that the masses of 1930s British audiences, many outside of London, had musical taste that had not
progressed since Edwardian days” (347). Novello, like Coward, wrote fairly traditional operettas with lavish settings and romantic plots, though Novello’s plots sometimes made the jump from romantic to outlandish. In *Glamorous Night* (1935), the heroine, Militza, is a star opera singer who, having won great favor with King Stefan of Krasnia, now holds a good deal of power over the monarch, and thus, over the nation itself. Seeking to overthrow the king is the conniving Baron Lydyeff, who makes repeated attempts on Militza’s life so as to shatter the monarch’s will and force him to abdicate the throne. As Militza struggles to flee Lydyeff’s wrath, she encounters Anthony Allen, a dry young inventor who has come up with the idea for television but is being paid to keep the idea under wraps by a powerful radio mogul. The plot gets increasingly more sensational, as a shipwreck leaves the two stranded together, and they wind up in a gypsy encampment before finally making it back to Krasnia. As in the case of Coward’s earlier play, the ending is bittersweet—Lydyeff is killed, but Militza chooses to remain with the king instead of going off with Anthony, thus putting the love of her country above all else.

Clearly, *Glamorous Night* is a spectacular show, though the plot is so overdone that it borders a bit on the ridiculous. In his critique, Morley dryly comments that though Novello was the most consistently popular composer of his time in England, “his success served as a sharp reminder that in those days it was quite difficult to overestimate the intelligence or desire for novelty of the average audience at a musical” (*Spread* 82), for virtually all of his shows featured the exact same kinds of sensational plots. As in most operettas, there is a good deal of diegetic singing in Novello’s work, and the fact that Militza is an opera singer allows for the composer to incorporate numerous songs into the piece without actually having to integrate them into the story. *Glamorous Night* also features a ballet, waltzes, and
other traditional forms of music and dance. Other Novello works like *The Dancing Years*, which again focuses on the relationship between a composer and a singer, would adopt many of the same plot and musical conventions. In short, the works of Coward and Novello, with their exotic settings, romantic plots, and overall indebtedness to the continental tradition, kept the British musical tied to the past instead of moving it toward the advent of the fully integrated show.

It is also important to consider the historical period in which these men were writing, for the devastation created during World War II obviously played a role in the stagnation of British musical theater. Coward refused to write anything new during the war (Morley *Spread* 103), and nearly all of the shows produced throughout the wartime years were revivals of older musicals. Snelson recounts that “a wartime combination of revivals of shows from up to thirty-five years previously with an absence of newer Broadway shows had held British musical theatre in a time-warp of its own” (106). Humorously, Morley asserts that the destruction of the British musical is not attributable to the threat of a German invasion during World War II, but rather, to the realization of an American invasion following the global conflict: “The bomb that fell on West End musicals did not come from an enemy power at all: it was first detonated on Broadway in March 1943, in the shape of *Oklahoma!*; but its impact would not be felt in London until four years later” (*Spread* 103). *Oklahoma!* achieved great success in the West End, a rather astonishing turn of events given the Americanness of this particular musical; why should British audiences respond so favorably to a show steeped in the American pioneer spirit and populated by cowboys? The answer lies in the escapism of *Oklahoma!*; a quality that was greatly needed following the destructiveness of the second world war:
As a result of the instant sunshine that *Oklahoma!* brought to end this English winter, critics and audiences alike simply fell in love with it, and that was the start of a love affair with the American musical which was to continue across many more post-war years, at first a largely uncritical affair. American musicals were welcomed with the same eagerness as other American inventions like Coca-Cola: certainly, these transatlantic productions might rot the brain or the teeth if taken to excess, but for sheer professional perfection Britain had nothing to match the American musical, so lie back and enjoy. (Morley *Spread* 113)

The unfortunate side effect was that the British musical, which had already stagnated during the 1940s, seemed in danger of dying out entirely in the 1950s; the transatlantic exchange between Britain and America was dominated entirely by the composers of the United States. Snelson contrasts the 1950s West End musical with the 1950s Broadway musical and points out that while all of the American imports are now regarded as canonical classics, “nothing of this British repertory has survived” (113). The 1950s likewise saw the premature death of Novello, the leading figure in British musical theater. Clearly, the British musical was in decline.

Of course, there were some exceptions to the rule. Two of the most noteworthy and popular British musicals produced in the 1950s included Sandy Wilson’s *The Boy Friend* (1954) and Julian Slade’s *Salad Days* (1954). Both of these shows played over 2,000 performances and held the number one and number two positions for longest running West End musical ever produced. This record would be broken nearly ten years later when *Oliver!* held its 2,284th performance in 1965, thus surpassing *Salad Days*’ 2,283 performance tally.

Snelson labels these two musicals as “a strike back against the American repertory” (115), though Wilson himself denied this claim. In the preface to the libretto for *The Boy Friend*, the composer explicitly states: “I would like to make it clear, here and now, that this show was never intended as a ‘reply to *Oklahoma!*’ or indeed to any of the very successful and essentially modern American musicals. I feel that the English Theatre has very far to go
before it can rival Broadway in this field” (20). Nevertheless, many British theatergoers could not help but view both The Boy Friend and Salad Days as an English countermove to the American invasion of the West End musical stage. Sheridan Morley and Ruth Leon also tout the importance of the one-two punch offered by these two musicals, which opened within a few short months of one another: “Julian Slade’s Salad Days and Sandy Wilson’s The Boy Friend…showed that there was a way forward for the apparently moribund British stage musical” (Mr. Producer 15), though the authors likewise point out that both musicals were conceived as small-scale shows, an image they retained even upon transfer to the West End.

The scope of these shows was partially the result of the American invasion, for the large-scale American musicals that were currently dominating the West End had taken up residence in most of the larger theater houses in London. This was yet another factor in the stagnation of British musical theater, for producing musicals on such a small scale prevented British librettists and composers from reaching the heights of their American counterparts. Ganzl notes that such shows were “unpretentiously staged for short seasons [and] they generally disappeared thereafter” (British 641). The Boy Friend likewise started life as a one hour musical from the Players’ Theatre Club. It evolved into a full-length West End hit despite the fact that few critics thought it would last. Nevertheless, its central appeal was this same smallness, as Morley writes that “the brilliance of the original Boy Friend lay in its passion for historical accuracy and its understanding that small is beautiful” (Spread 132). Whereas the earlier operettas of Novello were epic, The Boy Friend and Salad Days kept things simple.
The quintessentially British elements of both these musicals relate to the nostalgic sensibilities that the English embraced as a coping mechanism following the devastation and disillusion of the World War II era. Snelson notes that both shows “present a particular sense of archetypal Britishness” (114), The Boy Friend through its emphasis on 1920s culture and its cast of aristocratic finishing school girls, and Salad Days through its idyllic look at young love and Cambridge culture. Though the plots of the two shows vary greatly, both musicals are good-natured satires of various English types, and both end happily for the young protagonists. Additionally, the subject matter of these two shows is decidedly light—the plot to Salad Days is driven by a magical piano named Minnie that causes people to dance! This is a contrast to the gritty, heavy themes presented in certain American musicals being produced at the time, and several critics who touted The Boy Friend and Salad Days as remedies for the American invasion cited their simplicity as their most estimable trait (Ganzl British 660).

The simplicity of these British musicals is fundamentally the result of the wistful visions adopted by both shows. Salad Days takes its title from a quote by Shakespeare’s Cleopatra as the Egyptian queen refers to “My Sallad dayes/When I was greene in judg ement” (I.v.73-74); the phrase, now used to signify simple days of inexperience, is aptly utilized as the title for Slade’s musical. Though Timothy and Jane’s main song is entitled “We Said We Wouldn’t Look Back,” the tone of the ballad is ironic “in that the reminder not to be nostalgic prompts in the lyrics exactly that which it aspires to eschew” (Snelson 115). The Boy Friend, which ends with all of the couples happily united and dancing the Charleston, embraces a similarly nostalgic image of a simpler, happier time. This charming lightness has allowed both musicals to endure, and they remain perennial favorites of smaller, repertory
theater companies. Of the two musicals, only *The Boy Friend* achieved true transatlantic success, however. The initial Broadway production ran a respectable 485 performances (Ganzl *British* 646) though the overall tone of the show was modified heavily for the American audiences. As Ganzl writes, “the feeling and the mood were gone. Broadway’s *Boy Friend* was no more the new 1920s musical it had been created to be. It was the burlesque everyone at the Players’ had wished to avoid” (*British* 646). If American audiences were unwilling to accept *The Boy Friend* in its natural state, they were completely unwilling to accept *Salad Days* in any form. Kenneth Jones notes that “unlike its similarly light and airy contemporary sister, Sandy Wilson’s *The Boy Friend*, the musical did not capture the imagination of an American audience over the years” (par. 5). Ironically, perhaps the two most enduring contributions made to musical theater by the production of these two shows, at least from a transatlantic point of view, were largely incidental. When *The Boy Friend* went to Broadway, several members of its original West End cast went with it, including a young Julie Andrews who made her Broadway debut in the New York production of this British musical. Andrews would go on to become one of Broadway’s most beloved leading ladies with starring roles in *My Fair Lady* and *Camelot*, roles which helped to catapult her to international fame as a film star when she landed the lead parts in *Mary Poppins* and *The Sound of Music*. As for *Salad Days*, it holds the distinction of being the very first musical ever seen by the great theater impresario Cameron Mackintosh. Mackintosh would go on to serve as the producer of some of the most successful shows in the history of both the West End and Broadway, including *Cats, Phantom, Les Miz*, and *Miss Saigon*; he would likewise play a fundamental role in the history of *Oliver!* (see Chapter 4).
Of course, these little known facts should not take away from the significant achievements of *The Boy Friend* and *Salad Days*. Both of these shows proved that British musical theater was hardly obsolete, even if the genre of the stage musical was fundamentally dominated by American composers and librettists. The wistful tones of both shows established one of the dominant contrasts between American musicals and British musicals in the 1950s: British musicals tended to look back toward a simpler period and a longer musical tradition. *The Boy Friend* makes full use of a style of music composed in the 1920s, and *Salad Days* is structured more like a musical revue than a modern musical. Snelson notes that this technique of looking back is in many ways analogous to the traditions in which Novello and Coward were writing in the earlier decades of British musical theater:

That *The Boy Friend* has been taken to be a leading example of the British musical in the 1950s is, however, in one sense particularly apt. The music of the show is derivative, using—albeit most skillfully—older styles. This approach is a constant one in British musical theatre. Novello consciously borrowed from a range of sources including classical music, Viennese operetta and certain characteristics of Richard Rodgers…while Coward relied strongly on Victorian parlour music and music-hall. (116)

Given that Britain had a much longer history than the United States to look back upon, it is unsurprising that the twentieth-century British musical was steeped in the musical traditions of earlier periods in English and European history. Lionel Bart would take a similarly nostalgic approach to the music he wrote for his first musicals, for he, like Coward, would write heavily in the tradition of the music hall, though his use of the Cockney idiom set him apart from Coward, Slade, Wilson, and virtually every other British composer who came before him. Furthermore, Bart would succeed in doing what none of his predecessors could do when he wrote *Oliver!* a few years later. By combining the Englishness of both Dickens and the nostalgic, music-hall style musical with the form and energy of an American integrated musical, Bart succeeded in writing the world’s first truly modern English musical
and thus created the most significant precursor to the British mega-musical. Ironically, Bart was looking back in order to move the British musical forward.

In summation, 1947 is perhaps the most important year to consider regarding our two disparate histories of *Oliver Twist* in performance and British musical theater; it was in 1947 that *Oklahoma!* debuted in the West End, nearly driving the British musical into extinction in the process. 1947 was also the year that David Lean and Stanley Haynes completed the script for Lean’s *Oliver Twist*; the definitive film version of Dickens’s novel would follow shortly. A Jewish East Ender by the name of Lionel Begleitter was only seventeen years old at the time, but a mere thirteen years later, he would change the face of British musical theater forever.
Chapter 2
“It’s A Fine Life” – The Triumph of Oliver!

In 1999, Andrew Lloyd Webber described Lionel Bart as “the father of the modern British musical” (Miller 81)—high praise indeed, particularly coming from someone of Lloyd Webber’s prominence in English musical theater. The legacies of Bart and Lloyd Webber are somewhat intertwined due to the transatlantic appeal of their musicals, though unlike Bart, Lloyd Webber was able to sustain that appeal through several different shows which found success both in the West End and on Broadway. For Bart, Oliver! (1960) marked the apex of his career. In spite of the fact that he was unable to recapture the magic of Oliver! in any of his subsequent works, Lionel Bart was far more than just a one-hit wonder. Nevertheless, even if Bart’s name is only spoken in conjunction with Oliver! in the decades to come, his legacy will remain perpetual thanks to this show’s enduring appeal.

Lionel Bart was born Lionel Begleitter, the last of eleven children born to a pair of Jewish refugees from Polish Galicia living in the East End slums (Rigdon 275). From a young age, Bart displayed an innate appreciation of music—his headmistress went so far as to label him a genius though the formal training he received in music was minimal: “Just enough, and no more. It is one of Lionel’s boasts that he has never had to play more than that in order to write some of the twentieth century’s most popular tunes” (Roper 7). This talent was a facet

Curiously, although Oliver! was quite revolutionary in its transatlantic popularity, no British composer was able to attain the same level of Anglo-American appeal in the years immediately following the first productions of Bart’s Dickensian musical. The wide gap here is startling, as Sheridan Morley asserts that “it was not until twenty years after Oliver! that Bart’s one true successor as sole creator of hit musicals which could also make an impact on Broadway, Andrew Lloyd Webber, would begin even to think about the possibility of a permanent London musical theatre company” (Spread 154).
of Bart’s abilities that many people would find extraordinary; David Barber once commented that the “amazing thing about him was that he could sing everything inside his head, every little harmony. He could think vertically, and hear what was meant to go beneath the melody line. I would play it on the piano and the moment I played a wrong note he was on to it. His songs were written to be acted and sung rather than played” (qtd. in Fronts 21). Throughout his youth, Bart was surrounded by different types of music. His ethnic background left him familiar with Yiddish melodies and folksongs, while his upbringing in the East End exposed him to music-hall ballads and street singing. He was an active listener and his capability for cataloguing different melodies in spite of his lack of formal musical training would prove central to his success.

Like many London children, Bart was evacuated during World War II, an experience that later helped to provide him with inspiration for his musical, Blitz! Following the war, he attended St. Martin’s School of Art in London on scholarship from 1944 to 1947. The lifestyle of an artist was a solitary one, however, and Bart was instinctively drawn toward the communal world of the theater instead. He soon became involved with the International Youth Center, a leftwing theater company for young adults, though Bart’s primary interest in the group was musical as opposed to political. He wrote songs for the organization and helped to stage cabaret shows (Wheeler 157). Eventually, he became a participant in another leftist amateur theatrical troupe called Unity Theatre when a song that he had written caught the attention of Alfie Bass, the actor running the troupe (Wheeler 157).

Since Unity encouraged its members to immerse themselves in all the different elements of staging a show, Bart began to develop an appreciation for the theatrical production process, though Jack Grossman recalls that Bart was at his best when he was writing music: “Lionel
had a piano upstairs—he was always known as the ‘one-finger merchant’—and we’d sit and kick ideas around. Some of us would agonize for days about writing, but Li always had a tremendous facility. You thought up a theme, and he would come back the next day with ten lyrics” (qtd. in Roper 14). It was while working with Unity that Bart wrote his first musical: a modernized adaptation of Ben Jonson’s *Volpone* entitled *Wally Pone, King of the Underworld* (Barker 12). It was also around this time that Lionel Begleitter officially became Lionel Bart—he borrowed the name from St. Bartholomew’s Hospital, a building that he passed while journeying between the East End and Unity Theatre (Wheeler 157). Bart’s first musical played for about eight weeks, a more than decent run for a show produced by a small theater company. David Roper acknowledges that the show “established a Cockney theme that has run through almost all Bart’s subsequent stage work” (15), and for certain, Cockney language, culture, and traditions would prove essential to many of the Bart musicals that followed, including *Oliver!*

It was in the mid-1950s that Bart’s vocation truly began to take shape. In 1956, the young songwriter met Tommy Steele, and, along with Mike Pratt, they formed a triumphant triumvirate: Bart and Pratt wrote the songs for the charismatic rocker Steele, who quickly became a British teen idol. As Steele’s career blossomed and he began to appear on television and film, Bart’s music started to reach wider audiences, thus earning him popularity, prestige, and prosperity. As Bart himself put it, “after a couple of years of hits with Tommy and others, we had the charts mastered” (qtd. in Roper 21). It was a lucrative time in the life of the young composer, not only from a financial standpoint, but simultaneously, from a creative perspective; in 1957 alone, he won three Ivor Novello Awards for songwriting, followed by an additional four in 1959. Bart gradually transitioned
from popular music to stage music with his work on musicals such as the avant-garde Cockney show *Fings Ain’t Wot They Used T’Be* (1959) and the musical adaptation of Fielding’s *Rape Upon Rape* entitled *Lock Up Your Daughters* (1959). But how did this songwriter, who worked mainly in the realm of popular music, go on to become the father of modern English musical theater? And how did he attain such stunning success in adapting a dark Dickensian novel into a happy musical? In order to answer these questions, an analysis of the state of the English theater in the 1950s is necessary. Though *Oliver!* maintains a strong appeal to this day, its initial production was, in many ways, a product of its period.

It seems somehow fitting that *Oliver!* premiered in 1960; not only did the adaptation start off a new decade, but it likewise started off a new chapter in the history of British musical theater. To say that this age marked a departure from the musicals of the past would be an understatement: fings were not wot they used t’be. The advent of Bart’s success meant the arrival of “a new generation of local composer led and symbolized by the abrasive cockney cheerfulness of Lionel Bart, a London music man about as far removed from Ivor Novello and Noël Coward as you could reasonably hope to get within one century and continent” (Morley *Spread* 153). Nevertheless, it was this audacious determination to break from the past that allowed for the spirit of theatrical experimentation to take hold in the 50s and 60s.

*Fings Ain’t Wot They Used T’Be* is an excellent starting point for an analysis of both Bart’s career and the state of British theater in the 50s and 60s, as *Fings* is representative of England’s theatrical climate in the decades following World War II. Like *Oliver!, Fings* was a product of its era, and it is doubtful that the musical could have emerged under just any circumstances. The two figures that were perhaps most responsible for the creation of these conducive conditions were Bertolt Brecht and Joan Littlewood, though of the two, only the
latter played an immediate role in the career of Lionel Bart. Nevertheless, the impact of Brecht, or, at the very least, the impact of what Brecht stood for, on British theater in the 1950s and 60s must be acknowledged. Martin Esslin writes that “future historians of English drama will describe the period since 1956 as an era of Brechtian influence” (147), a statement echoed by Kenneth Tynan who claims that the discovery of Brecht “had enormous and still reverberating repercussions on almost every aspect of theatrical style: on playwrights, obviously, but also on directors…on designers…on composers, and on such other departments of stagecraft as lighting, wardrobe, and make-up” (11). In spite of these claims, the weight of Brecht’s writings on the theater is somewhat open to debate, for the English writers, directors, producers, and actors who touted Brecht as an influence often seemed to be referring to Brecht in the abstract sense. Esslin qualifies his statement about the profound influence of Brecht by acknowledging that there was “a great deal of talk and discussion about Brecht and what he was thought to stand for, but few valid productions of Brecht, little genuine knowledge about Brecht, and hence little evidence of any influence of Brecht’s actual work and thought. The ‘Brechtian’ era in England stood under the aegis not of Brecht himself but of various second-hand ideas and concepts about Brecht” (Esslin’s emphases, 147). In spite of this limitation, Brecht’s symbolic importance to a generation of playwrights, directors, and performers had a profound effect on trends in the British theatrical scene around the time that Bart began to achieve his first successes in musical theater.

The decades leading up to the emergence of Lionel Bart as the driving force in British musical theater did not inspire much in the way of the experimentalism that would later prove fundamental to the emergence of Oliver! The traditionalism of Coward and Novello’s
operetta-style musicals was coupled with a conservatism that dominated the entire English stage for much of the early part of the twentieth century. In comparison to what was being produced on the continent, England’s theater scene seemed fundamentally conventional. Noted theater historian Allardyce Nicoll commented that the English theater lacked “the spirit for experimentation” and declared the entertainment form to be “artistically and mentally moribund” (1). This conservatism was personified in the sustained existence of the office of Lord Chamberlain, which continued to indiscriminately censor plays based on fluctuating standards.

In contrast to the traditionalism of the mainstream English theater were the small, itinerant, leftwing theater companies that emerged in the 1930s in response to the struggles of the working class. Robert Leach writes that the theater usually proved a more positive outlet for such political sentiments than narrative prose; whereas Gorky, Sinclair, and Toller were purveyors of a pessimistic form of pro-Communism, the playwrights and directors behind the leftist theater groups sought “to provide a more positive message” (14). Nevertheless, the primary goals of producing such shows were political as opposed to artistic, and many members of the theater companies were equally active in political campaigns for leftwing candidates. As mentioned, Unity Theatre, where Lionel Bart first learned the ins and outs of the theatrical production process, was fundamentally leftist, and even if not fully communist “at least anti-Fascist” (Leach 32). Of course, Bart’s involvement with Unity would not take shape until after World War II, and by this point, the political dimensions of many such companies had declined significantly. The radicalism of the 1930s in response to the conservatism of the traditional elements in English theater (and society) was met by an even stronger conservative response following the Second World War—hence, the late arrival of
Brecht and Beckett on the English stage. Nevertheless, Brecht would eventually exercise significant influence on the English theater scene in the post-World War II era.

Bart, though not immersed in the Brechtian debate, had dabbled with the radical elements in the British theater throughout the developmental years of his professional career; Unity Theatre had the distinction of being “the first company in this country to stage Brecht” (Roper 13). Though Bart participated in several Unity productions in a wide variety of roles (both onstage and backstage), he ultimately viewed Unity as a stepping stone for the bigger things that were to come, such as his more mainstream work with Steele (Roper 14). Furthermore, he was never an explicitly political artist in the fashion of most of the troupe’s other members. If Bart himself was only tangentially touched by the Brecht movement, however, his involvement with Joan Littlewood placed him more squarely in the context of this theatrical trend. Moreover, if it did nothing else for Bart, the Brechtian movement allowed him to tap into a bold, fresh spirit of British musical theater which Oliver! itself would later come to represent.²

Joan Littlewood holds a paradoxical place in Lionel Bart’s biography. It was she who got him involved with Fings, one of his first great successes in the realm of musical theater and a key predecessor to Oliver! She also directed and helped produce his disastrous musical Twang!! , the show that marked a drastic turning point in Bart’s career, fortunes, luck, and very life. Of course, it is impossible to assign the blame for the debacle that was Twang!! on any one person, and whatever her impact on Bart’s legacy, Littlewood’s influence on the theater scene of the 1950s and early 60s is incontrovertible. Today, she is best remembered for the development of the Theatre Workshop, an organization which undoubtedly helped to

² Many critics would assert that the most Brechtian element of Oliver! was its spectacularly multi-faceted set.
define the experimentalist tenor of Britain’s theater scene in the years leading up to the premiere of *Oliver!*

Littlewood had studied acting at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, but her experiences there turned her off to the modern, commercial theater, as the types of acting stressed at the academy seemed “posed, static, and unexciting…all this dishonest exhibitionist stuff” (qtd. in “Theatre Worker” 11). Upon moving to Manchester in 1934, Littlewood met her future husband, Ewan MacColl (born Jimmie Miller), who was already heavily entrenched in the leftist theater movements of the era. Together, the two formed an organization that would serve as a forerunner to the Theatre Workshop: The Theatre of Action. The troupe’s manifesto indicated the centrality of politics to its goals: “The Theatre will perform, mainly in working-class districts, plays which express the life and struggles of the workers” (MacColl 61). This emphasis on addressing the concerns of the lower orders and playing to the spirit of the working class is a particularly important consideration when one analyzes the success of *Fings*, and later, *Oliver!*

Coupled with the overt political agenda behind the theater troupe was a focus on experimentation: *Fings* itself marked a unique experiment in which the two principal writers were both neophytes. Such a technique was a hallmark of Littlewood and MacColl’s approach to theater, as MacColl writes that “we began to work exclusively with people who hadn’t done any theatre, not even amateur theatre. We said, let’s start right from the very beginning, and investigate, probe, find out what works, what doesn’t work” (62). When Bart himself eventually became involved with Littlewood’s company, he was still relatively new to the professional theater scene. It was the aforementioned spirit of experimentation that prompted Littlewood to seek him out.
Theatre Action was followed by Theatre Union, which lasted from 1936 to 1942; the group disbanded during the Second World War. Littlewood reunited the organization’s surviving members following the great conflict, and the Theatre Workshop itself finally began to take shape, though, as mentioned, the theatrical element of the troupe’s mission statement seemed to supersede the political element in the early years following World War II. In spite of this shift, the group maintained a keen interest in the experimentalist theatrical philosophies that had driven them in the past. James Corbett notes that the group members “planned new plays relevant to the day, new acting styles and productions with popular affinities and with settings that would utilize modern techniques of building and construction” (327). Littlewood was committed to the belief that the art of theater was “still capable of development” (qtd. in Corbett 327), and the group continued to experiment, not only with new styles of acting and directing, but also, with new methods of set design, production, and music.

It is not difficult to perceive the links between the goals of Theatre Workshop and the growing Brechtian influence on English theater. Littlewood, who had previously done work translating Brecht’s plays into English, “had long been influenced by Brecht, and in 1955, at the Devon Festival, she had played the title role in the first English production of Mutter Courage [aka Mother Courage], which she directed herself” (Hayman 136).3 Despite his skepticism regarding the English understanding of Brecht, Esslin asserts that “Joan Littlewood[’s]…work on plays by other authors must, on the whole, be regarded as the most

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3 Whether or not Littlewood was a true follower of Brecht or a dabbler in the Brechtian spirit of the post-World War II era is debatable; Leach asserts that her work on Mother Courage was Littlewood’s “only serious encounter with Bertolt Brecht” (111) and labels the results of this encounter as disappointing: “Perhaps she was too radical theatrically for Brecht—for she was more daring, more unorthodox than he ever was—or perhaps her innate anarchism tangled with his more overt Marxism” (111). Leach goes on to note that Brecht had held Littlewood in high regard. Apparently, he had only been willing to grant performance permission for Mother Courage if Littlewood herself (or Gracie Fields, who was then unavailable) played the title role (112).
positive results of Brechtian influence on the art of stage directing in England” (151). Esslin is especially gracious in his praise of Littlewood’s understanding of the Brechtian view of stage music: “Joan Littlewood achieved the largest measure of success in this direction…and she was also responsible for what must be regarded as the only really notable work which owed a debt to the Brechtian use of music in Britain in the period concerned: Brendan Behan’s The Hostage (1959)” (149). Oh, What a Lovely War!, regarded by some as Littlewood’s magnum opus, displayed a decidedly Brechtian influence in its presentation of World War I era patriotic music, which was ironically played while the horrifying casualty statistics of the First World War flashed across an electric screen.

Focusing on this issue of music, the importance of both Littlewood and Brecht to the emergence of Oliver! begins to grow more clear, though before proceeding to Oliver!, attention must be given to the play that brought the three critical elements—Brecht’s influence, Littlewood’s experimentation, and Bart’s music—together: Fings Ain’t Wot They Used T’Be. For certain, music had been an important element of Littlewood’s work from early on. Judith Lee Goodman notes that music was fundamental to the experimental approach taken by the group: “They would accept only actors who could sing as well as move, and the musical element would become a vital component of almost all successive productions. For its inspiration, it would draw on the English music hall tradition” (22), thus furthering the idea that the troupe’s primary goals centered on reaching out to ordinary people—the same sort of audience who enjoyed music-hall entertainment in the Victorian era. The emphasis on working-class entertainment would be taken one step further with Fings, for not only would the score reflect the pervasive influence of the music hall, but it
would simultaneously exemplify the Cockney idiom that was associated with the very class that had patronized the music hall in its heyday.

By the time Littlewood and Frank Norman began work on *Fings*, the Theatre Workshop was based at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East. At this point, the troupe had attained more success and mainstream attention than they had ever enjoyed previously despite numerous reservations from traditionalists. Nevertheless, by the mid 50’s, prominent reviewers were growing more open to the possibilities of experimental theater; in the years leading up to *Fings*, Littlewood’s group had garnered some of the best notices in the history of its existence. Avant-garde theater was rapidly making the transition from the fringe of the theatrical world toward the center stage. *Fings* itself would become a part of this transition, as it was one of five Workshop plays produced between 1959 and 1961 that would be successfully reproduced in the West End.

In spite of the fact that Littlewood’s projects were becoming more mainstream, *Fings* still embodied much of the experimentalist spirit of the earlier projects. Norman had not originally conceived of the play as a musical, but Littlewood convinced him to rethink the matter: “I don’t think we ought to do it as a straight play, like all that old rubbish those West End managements put on. It should be a musical, or anyway have a few songs in it. I’ve met this wonderful nutcase called Lionel Bart, I’ve already talked to him about it and he’s agreed to write some songs” (qtd. in Norman 46). In her autobiography, Littlewood asserts that after Bart read the script for *Fings*, he claimed that it was the “first time I’ve heard cockney as she is spoke” (qtd. in Littlewood 540). Thus, *Fings* was of great interest to the composer because of its relevance to a culture that he had known all his life, and also, because of its

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4 Leach’s text asserts that there are many untruths or half-truths in Littlewood’s autobiography. Whether or not Bart’s involvement with *Fings* emerged exactly as Littlewood recounts, it is undeniable that she had a great fondness for the composer, and simultaneously, that he was particularly interested in the project.
innovativeness in exploring that culture onstage. The experimentalist approach taken by Norman meant that Bart could take a similarly improvisational approach to composing the music and writing the lyrics.

With its avant-garde tone and format, it is not difficult to see why *Fings* was perceived by many as Brechtian. In terms of Bart’s involvement with the project, Sheridan Morley claims that there were many people “who believed that the triumph of Bart’s *Fings* and *Lock Up Your Daughters* meant a kind of Brechtian change, whereby audiences would be prepared to accept extremely unglamorous low-life musicals with maybe also a social message” (*Spread* 153). Both Morley and Esslin point out the flaws in this theory, with Esslin citing the fact that many of the shows that were produced in the same spirit as *Fings* failed dismally in comparison. *Fings* itself enjoyed great success, however, and both audiences and critics recognized that they had experienced “a new kind of musical—brash, irreverent and 100 percent working-class English” (Jackson 102). Littlewood had understood that this was the primary goal of the project from the start: “In the theatre of those dear departed days when every actress had roses round her vowels, and a butler’s suit was an essential part of an actor’s equipment, the voice of the Cockney was one long whine of blissful servitude…This refined and treasured theatre could not attract nor touch the vulgar populace, our theatres were kept pure and innocent, with the charm of an aged Peter Pan” (qtd. in Norman *Fings* 5). Following this sardonic assertion, Littlewood writes that Norman had never experienced such plays, and thus was able to delve into the true nature of Cockney life and bring it into the theater in a new way. Her preface concludes with an appreciation of the fact that this new musical would appeal to a different class of patrons, “most of whom, like Frank Norman, had never been in a theatre in their lives” (qtd. in Norman *Fings* 5). Equally important to
Littlewood was the issue of language, for her days at the R.A.D.A. had turned her off to the
My Fair Lady-esque linguistic training that English girls were forced to endure there: “A kid
goes to R.A.D.A. and she’s told to stop talking like a northerner, a southerner, or a Welsh
girl—she’s told to talk like a puppet, you see? So language is despised, all the virility of
language” (qtd. in “Theater Worker” 11). For Fings, Norman and Bart both wrote in an
unashamedly Cockney idiom; in fact, the play was originally conceived as little more than a
series of conversations between Cockneys. 5 Whereas many plays produced previously in the
West End had confined this dialect to servants or comedy reliefs, Fings presented a more
realistic and convincing insight into the culture that employed the Cockney dialect.

It is appropriate that Bart’s first true foray into professional musical theater saw him
writing in the idiom that he knew most intimately; between his East End background and his
years visiting music halls, the melodies and lyrics to Fings reflected Lionel Bart, the man, as
opposed to simply being a product of Lionel Bart, the composer. As Scott Miller notes,
“Bart had come from fiercely humble beginnings himself and knew these characters” (81).
Here, Morley’s comments about Bart’s divergences from the British musical tradition of
Novello and Coward become clearer: while the shows of the 30s and 40s reflected the
traditions of operetta, ballet, and other genres from the European continent, Bart’s music and
lyrics reflected the lively traditions of the London music hall.

The lyrics to the title number exemplify the working-class nature of the project, as Fred,
the former Cockney gangster, and his companion Lily, once a practitioner of the world’s

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5 In Why Fings Went West, Norman writes that Fings Ain’t Wot They Used T’Be emerged from an essay he had
published on London slang (36). From there, it continued to evolve: “It came to me at the time of writing the
piece that a novel and effective way of handling the subject would be to present it in dialogue, in the form of
several playlets accompanied by brief glossaries and explanations at the end of each. Stephen Spender was very
pleased with the piece and thought that the dialogue was so ‘splendid’ that I ought to try my hand at writing a
play” (36).
oldest profession, reflect on the state of present-day London. Their Cockney vernacular
coupled with the lively melody and bawdy lyrics is at once evocative of music-hall culture:

    I used to lead a lovely life of sin, dough!
    I charged a ton.
    Now it’s become an under cover game
    Who wants to read a postcard in a window
    “Massaging Done”?
    Somehow the business doesn’t seem the same.
    It’s a very different scene.
    Well you know what I mean.

There’s toffs wiv Toffee noses, and
Poofs in coffee `ouses and
Fings ain’t wot they used t’be
There’s short time low-priced mysteries
Wivout proper histories
Fings ain’t wot they used t’be. (23)

One can immediately detect the influence of the music hall on Bart’s melodies upon
examining some of the music-hall songs of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries
and comparing their topics, idioms, and lyrics to the songs Bart wrote for Fings. In Best
Music Hall and Variety Songs, an archival text edited by Peter Gammond, there are
numerous examples of songs that are written in the same Cockney vernacular and cynical
tone as the title song to Bart’s show. Featuring such titles as “Wot’s The Good of Hanyfink?
Why! Nuffink!”, and “Alibut, `Addick Or `Ake,” these songs epitomize London street life.
A short section of the book is devoted entirely to Cockney songs, and the sardonic
introduction to this section emphasizes the importance of Cockney culture to the music hall
as a form of entertainment: “The Cockney, the creature born, by definition, within the sound
of Bow Bells and irretrievably of the working-class (there is no such thing as a middle or
upper class Cockney), is, without dispute, from him at any rate, the salt of the earth….Some
may consider that music-hall opinion on this subject may be somewhat loaded in their favour
as so many of the stars of music-hall were Cockneys themselves” (203). A song first performed by Albert Chevalier follows, and the lyrics to this number contain numerous parallels to Bart’s own lyrics in terms of language and tone. “Wot Cher!”, written by Chevalier and Charles Ingle in 1891, is clearly a Cockney number: “Last week down our alley come a toff/Nice old geezer with a nasty cough/Sees my missus, takes `is topper off/In a very gentlemanly way!/~Ma’am says he, ‘I `ave some news to tell,/Your rich Uncle Tom of Camberwell,/~Popped off recent, which it ain’t a sell,/Leaving you `is little Donkey Shay’” (204). Even more striking is a 1935 Cockney music hall ballad by Percy Morris and Malcolm Ives, “The Council Schools Are Good Enough For Me.” The date of this song’s composition places it more squarely in the era of the music hall as Bart himself experienced it. Here, the Cockney slang is even heavier and the celebration of Cockney culture is almost palpable:

Oh! They’ll never make an `Ighbrow Cockney aht o’me,  
I’d rather be a Lowbrow Townie;  
You won’t find me in bags, along with ‘Blues’ and ‘Fags,’  
A-knockin’ cops abaht in them there Student Rags.  
I ain’t a one for Rolls Royce phrases.  
I leaves that to the Aristocracy  
And as long as I’m a-blowin’,  
And ‘Old Father Thames’ keeps flowin’,  
Oh! The Council Schools are good enough for me! (206)

Though Fings is more than simply a tribute to the tradition of the music hall, its musical score falls squarely in the music-hall tradition, which is only fitting given the purpose of the project.

Predictably, several reviewers linked Fings all the way back to the tradition of Gay’s The Beggar’s Opera, arguably the forefather of all musicals (see Chapter 5). Like Macheath and most of the other central players in Gay’s ballad opera, the lead characters in Fings are all
likeable lowlifes: Tosher is a “ponce”; Betty and Rosey are both prostitutes; Redhot is an ex-con; and Collins is a corrupt cop. It is therefore not surprising that most of Bart’s songs focus on low subjects: gambling, pimping, drinking, and prostitution. This base subject matter, combined with the sardonic satire of the middle and upper classes incorporated into several of the songs—including a humorous number where Fred tries to go “Contempery” by modernizing his gambling establishment—again links the piece to music-hall culture. This is arguably the musical’s defining theme, as Miller declares that *Fings* is “a British music hall lament for the loss of community in modern times” (81). Of course, the music hall itself had been an institution devoted to such a sense of community amongst the lower orders.

Though most of the songs featured in *Fings* are clearly modified versions of traditional music-hall ballads, complete with the trademark Cockney characters and the bawdy humor of the music-hall stage, Bart also utilizes different genres and musical styles. “Layin’ Abaht,” with its languid melody and long notes, is clearly a tribute to the old-fashioned drinking song, while “Where It’s Hot” features an energetic Latin rhythm which humorously contrasts with Redhot’s Cockney accent. Bart even manages to return to his rock and roll roots as “Carve Up” is sung as a rock number. Consequently, while Bart was clearly working within the music-hall tradition, he simultaneously broadened the scope of the score to *Fings* by incorporating other types of music into the music-hall format of the show. Bart’s distinctive talent for writing songs evocative of the music halls while experimenting with different musical genres would serve him well when he undertook the task of writing the score to *Oliver!* only a few years later. The diversity of styles employed in his Dickensian adaptation would include comic music-hall songs, pop ballads, street-singing, and even songs written in a Jewish folksong motif.
Perhaps even more vital to the success of both these shows was Bart’s ability to perceive the musicality of everyday London life. Whereas Novello and Coward turned to lofty subjects and fantastic settings in their musicals, Bart was able to take the familiar elements of Cockney life and explore their melodies and harmonies in exciting new ways. Here then is an essentially Dickensian element of Bart’s approach to writing music; like Dickens, Bart took subjects and issues that Londoners would have found very familiar and transformed them into larger-than-life creations by delving into the untapped romantic potential lurking beneath the surface.

Between its experimental framework and distinctive score, *Fings* was clearly ahead of its time. It is important to note, however, that *Fings* is not a book musical—the songs in *Fings* are not essential to the (already loose) plot. Thus, it is not only the style of music and the idiom of the lyrics that reinforce the Englishness of the project, but the form of the show itself, which is more connected to ballad opera or music-hall revue. All of these matters must be considered in the evaluation of *Oliver!*, for *Oliver!* fits the classification of a book musical far more aptly than *Fings*. Since *Oliver!* is written in the inherently American genre of the integrated show, the question of how to preserve the Englishness of the source is of great consequence. Nevertheless, the answer to this question was prefigured by Bart’s work on *Fings*, for the two defining characteristics of the score to this innovative musical—the music-hall influence and the Cockney idiom employed by Bart—are perhaps the two most central traits of the Englishness of *Oliver!*

Bart’s other early success, *Lock Up Your Daughters*, earned him the distinction of having two hit shows running simultaneously, for *Daughters* was transferred to the West End while

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6 A more accurate label might be “play with music,” as Norman had originally conceived of *Fings* as a straight play.
*Fings* was still playing there. The show’s librettist, Bernard Miles, had followed the success of *Fings*, and thus sought out Bart to serve as the lyricist for his own piece; Bart would write the words to the melodies of composer Laurie Johnson. *Daughters* was a more traditional musical than the avant-garde *Fings*, though there was still a sense of innovation associated with the production, due in part to the fact that it was the first show to open at Miles’s Mermaid Theatre. A 1959 issue of *Plays and Players* noted that Miles and his wife had “at last realized their dream of creating a new theatre in the hitherto barren City of London” (5), and the fact that Bart was brought on board to help with the project reinforces his popularity at the time.

The lyrics to *Lock Up Your Daughters*, though not written in the Cockney spirit of *Fings*, still feature Bart’s trademark catchiness and nostalgic appreciation for simple subjects and low-class characters. Songs like “When Does the Ravishing Begin?” and “Sunny Sunday Morning” illustrate these elements, and these songs fit in well with the conventions Bart utilized in *Fings*. Once again, the influence of the music hall on his songwriting is immediately detectable. In “Red Wine and a Wench,” Sotmore and Ramble perform a duet that focuses almost entirely on women and drinking, two subjects that were of vital importance to the music-hall ballad, and music-hall culture in general. Various numbers sung by the show’s female characters—who, like many of the heroines in *Fings*, display a high level of carnal knowledge—embody yet another convention of music-hall culture in their presentation of the sexually liberated female.

As in the case of *Fings*, Bart’s work on *Lock Up Your Daughters* would prefigure *Oliver!* in several important ways. Like *Fings*, *Daughters* features an unscrupulous group of characters, but as is the case in *Fings*, Bart’s creative and engaging lyrics make even the
immoral characters seem somehow loveable. This technique would later prove fundamental to the depiction of Fagin, the Dodger, and Nancy in Oliver! Similarly, although Lock Up Your Daughters does not include the same Cockney elements as Fings—elements that would again feature prominently in Oliver!—the lyrics to the songs in both musicals reflect Bart’s appreciation of music-hall culture.

Given that Bart’s involvement in Fings was more comprehensive, it is possible to view this earlier show as the more important of the two in terms of prefiguring Oliver! (a musical for which Bart would take on the awesome task of writing the book, music, and lyrics). Nevertheless, if Fings was an important precursor to Oliver! because of its tone, theme, and experimental approach, then Daughters was an equally important predecessor from a more practical standpoint. Two of the men who worked behind the scenes on Lock Up Your Daughters would later be indispensable to the success of Oliver!: director Peter Coe and set designer Sean Kenny.

Coe had been born to a working-class family in the southern part of London: “‘My parents and I decided that I should be a teacher so I studied and qualified.’ After discovering an aptitude for theatre and a distinct disability for teaching, he spent a stormy three and a half years as an actor. Stormy, because besides acting, he had to find work in turn as a farm hand, a crane driver, a factory worker, a clerk and a postman.” (qtd. in Albery “Coe,” par. 1). West End producer Michael MacOwan eventually took an interest in Coe and asked him to teach acting at the London Academy of Dramatic Art. In a two-year time frame, Coe turned professional producer and became Director of Productions at Repertory Theatres in Carlisle, Ipswich and Hornchurch. While at Hornchurch, his work caught the attention of Miles who offered him the post of resident director at the Mermaid, which, as mentioned, was a brand
new theater. Coe was a neophyte regarding musical theater when he took on *Lock Up Your Daughters*, but his lack of experience may in fact have contributed to the success he achieved in this genre, for much of this success was attributed to his innovative visions regarding the possibilities for staging musicals.

Sean Kenny, whose set for *Oliver!* later won universal acclaim from critics in both Britain and America, was likewise new to musical theater—in fact, Kenny considered himself an architect as opposed to a set designer. A fervent admirer of Frank Lloyd Wright’s techniques, Kenny undertook the long journey from his hometown of Tipperary, Ireland to Arizona in 1950 so that he could join other disciples of Wright and study under the master himself. Like Bart, Kenny was involved with Littlewood’s Theatre Workshop company, designing the set for *The Hostage*. Kenny’s work with Littlewood and Miles thus linked him to Bart early on in his career, and his particular talents, like those of Coe, would later be vital to the success of *Oliver!*

*Lock Up Your Daughters* ran for 330 performances when it opened at the Mermaid Theatre, and the show later found even greater success when it was revived in the West End in 1962. The fact that Lionel Bart had two hit shows running simultaneously so early in his career was a testament to both his popularity and his indefatigable creativity. The East End songwriter who had cut his teeth on rock songs was rapidly becoming the dominant force in British musical theater. Bart’s music-hall musicals were clearly far removed from the operettas of Novello, and his energetic celebration of Cockney culture seemed to match the creativity and vigor that had made American musicals so popular in the West End.

The fact that Bart eventually saw musical potential in one of Dickens’s novels is not surprising given the issues discussed in the Overture, though the fact that he selected *Oliver*
*Twist* as the story most befitting of musical treatment is fairly remarkable—*Twist* had remained one of the most popular of Dickens’s novels up to that point, but it was also justifiably viewed as one of his darkest. Moreover, the cultural perception of *Twist* was now intimately connected with the 1948 Lean film, a movie which leaves the viewer feeling as though there is very little to sing about in this story. Nevertheless, Lean’s adaptation proved an important influence on Bart, not only in the writing of *Oliver!* but likewise in the very conception of the adaptation. The Lean film was just one of several sources that helped to inspire the gestation of *Oliver!*, however. Some of Bart’s other inspirations were highly unlikely ones at that.

In his youth, Bart had frequented a candy shop outside of his parents’ house that sold penny chocolates (Roper 39). One such sweet was a chocolate bar produced by Terry’s, a long-established confectionary company based in York. The four-ounce chocolate bar was called an “Oliver Twist,” and featured a bright label with a picture of little Oliver eagerly holding forth his bowl. Of course, the orphan, as he is presented on the chocolate bar, looks nothing like his novelistic counterpart. The Oliver featured on the wrapper of the candy bar is a cheery, healthy-looking lad with a bright smile on his face. His ragged parish uniform is replaced with a schoolboy’s outfit and he seems to bear closer resemblance to Little Lord Fauntleroy than Dickens’s workhouse orphan. Furthermore, none of the terror or sadness incorporated into the orphan’s request for more as it is depicted in the novel is apparent in the candy bar image. Obviously, all of these changes to the imagery surrounding Dickens’s character were necessary from a marketing standpoint; no one would buy a chocolate bar that depicted a miserable and ragged urchin. Nevertheless, the complete reinvention of the Dickensian source, done solely for the purposes of promoting a product, seems almost
exploitative. While a product like the Terry’s candy bar can do little harm to Dickens
directly, it does help to shape the cultural perception of Dickens and reinforces the
stereotypical cheery images of the Dickens universe, images which are leagues removed
from the world of *Twist*.

Even so, the memory of this obscure little treat stayed with Lionel Bart from his childhood
well into his adult years. Curiously, this memory helped to inspire Bart to explore the
musical potential of Dickens’s *Oliver Twist*. In “One of the Worldwide Family,” Bart claims
that “the image for the show came to me from a candy” (par. 2), and it is little wonder that
*Oliver!* begins with the scene of the title character asking for more given that this
representation had left such an impression on Bart from his childhood onward.

The candy bar story has become part of the lore surrounding *Oliver!* and presents an
interesting insight into the creation of *Oliver!* for several reasons, though the two which
immediately stand out relate to the depiction of the happy orphan on the candy bar wrapper
and the use of a Dickens character to market a product. For certain, the jolly Oliver
portrayed on the wrapper seems an important forefather to Bart’s vision of Dickens’s
protagonist—*Oliver!* presents a cheery representation of the orphan that often stands in
opposition to the misery and abuse that surround the hero in the original story.
Simultaneously, the fact that Bart was inspired to write *Oliver!* by a marketing campaign
designed to capitalize on a famous Dickensian character, as opposed to his being inspired by
the novel itself, raises at least some questions about whether *Oliver!* was truly conceived as
an artistic endeavor, or rather, as an attempt to cash in on the transcendent commercial appeal
of Dickens. Intriguingly, Dickens himself would probably have appreciated the Terry’s
marketing campaign. In *Dickens in Cyberspace*, Jay Clayton describes the author as a marketing genius well ahead of his time:

> Like today’s Internet pioneers, he showed genius in creating new channels of distribution for his writing. He had a hand in inventing such major breakthroughs as publication by monthly numbers, serialization of new fiction in weekly journals, and uniform editions of a living author (himself). Moreover, he was never averse to commercializing these enterprises: his serials carried advertising from almost the beginning, and he took pleasure in noting the spinoff products from his imagination, such as the Little Nell Cigar and the Gamp Umbrella, even though he received no royalties from their sale. He understood their publicity value, just as he later realized the marketing value of his public readings (another of his firsts). (3-4)

If Dickens encouraged lending Nell’s name to a brand of cigars, it seems impossible to fault Terry’s for lending Oliver’s name to a chocolate bar. Simultaneously, it seems impossible to fault Bart for having been inspired by a promotional campaign given the fact that by the time he began work on *Oliver!*, the novel and its characters had already entered the popular consciousness.

While the chocolate bar may have provided Bart with the inspiration necessary to begin work on a musical adaptation of *Oliver Twist*, it provided little in the way of concrete guidance. In fact, all it gave the composer to work with was an image and an idea, as opposed to an outline or a form. For these more substantial elements, Bart turned to another key source of inspiration.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the 1948 Lean film, released when Bart was eighteen years old, was the most influential live action version of the story regarding the larger culture text at that point in time. In the article featured in the Palladium souvenir program, Bart lists the Lean adaptation as a direct source for *Oliver!*, unlikely though this may seem. For certain, Lean’s film is one of the darkest adaptations of a Dickens novel ever produced. Furthermore, Alec Guinness’s depiction of Fagin as a terrifying corruptor of children seems the very
antithesis of Bart’s revised vision of the old man as a loveable rascal who genuinely cares about his charges. Nevertheless, if the Terry’s candy bar was able to provide Bart with the inspiration for a musical version of *Oliver Twist*, then the Lean film helped to provide the composer with a point of reference for the story and characters, as well as an effective outline for the plot. Indeed, the element of *Oliver!* that is most directly connected back to the Lean film is the structure of the story. Lean effectively condensed Dickens’s novel into a manageable screenplay and focused on transferring the most memorable characters and episodes from the story to the big screen as opposed to trying to tell the entire story as Dickens had conceived it.\(^7\) The narrative of Lean’s film is thus tighter, and appropriately more cinematic. Bart followed the Lean film closely in plotting his musical and almost every scene in the Lean version has a corresponding scene in *Oliver!*\(^8\) Lean’s influence can also be seen in some of the changes that Bart makes to the story; like Lean, Bart re-imagines Brownlow as Oliver’s grandfather. One of the only major differences between the two adaptations regarding the storyline is that Lean includes a condensed version of the Monks subplot, while Bart excises this element entirely.

Ultimately, the central influence of the Lean film on Bart’s vision for *Oliver!* relates to the sequence of events in the story. The plots of the two adaptations proceed very closely, and the similarities here reinforce the Lean film’s influence on the cultural perception of *Twist*,

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\(^7\) Most notably, the Lean film completely eliminates the countryside portion of the novel. This excision likewise means the elimination of the Maylie family. Not even Rose Maylie—usually the sole character from this section of the novel to appear in live action versions, frequently in the role of Mr. Brownlow’s niece—is included.

\(^8\) Both adaptations contain all of the following scenes: Oliver’s abuse in the workhouse, Oliver’s asking for more, Mr. Bumble’s courtship of Mrs. Corney, Oliver’s apprenticeship with Mr. Sowerberry, his mistreatment at the hands of Mrs. Sowerberry and Claypole, his subsequent altercation with Noah, his journey to London, his introduction to the Dodger and Fagin, the scene in which Oliver awakens to discover Fagin counting his treasures, the picking of Brownlow’s pocket and Oliver’s arrest, Sikes and Fagin’s plot to use Nancy to get Oliver back, Oliver’s good treatment by Brownlow and Mrs. Bedwin, his abduction by Nancy and Sikes, the Bumbles’ domestic troubles, the death of Old Sally, Nancy’s meeting with Brownlow, her murder at the hands of Sikes, the pursuit of Sikes and his subsequent death, and finally, the safe return of Oliver to Mr. Brownlow.
then and now. In spite of the differences between Lean’s dark vision of Dickensian London and Bart’s cheerful musical, the fact that Bart’s adaptation follows the plot of Lean’s version so closely has actually served to reinforce the firm hold of the Lean film on the culture text of Oliver Twist—since Oliver! is such a familiar version of the story, most casual viewers assume that the plot of the musical is akin to the plot of the novel. Hence, because the plot of the musical is based on the plot of the Lean film, one could argue that the story of Twist, as we understand it today, has much more to do with Lean’s vision than with Dickens’s version.

If the Terry’s chocolate bar helped to plant the seed for Oliver!, the Lean film gave Bart the tools necessary to cultivate that seed. But what about the most obvious source for Bart’s Oliver!: Dickens’s Oliver Twist? The Terry’s candy bar story and the influence of the Lean film clearly indicate that Bart was more inspired by the culture text of Oliver Twist than the actual novel when he set about writing Oliver!; however, the question of just how familiar Bart was with the novel when he started work on Oliver! is relatively unimportant. It seems fairly obvious that even if the composer had not read Oliver Twist until he actually began work on his show in earnest, he must have read it at some point during the composition period as both the libretto and score contain numerous direct allusions to the original text. Furthermore, it is probably the original novel itself more than any other source that seemed to display true musical potential—a musical based solely on a candy bar or on the decidedly unmusical Lean film would seem ludicrous. Oliver Twist is certainly a dark novel, but it also embodies many of the qualities discussed in the Overture that make Dickens an excellent source for musical adaptation. As the melodramatic Victorian stage tradition undoubtedly indicates, there are plenty of emotional highpoints in the original novel, any of which can serve as appropriate moments for characters to transition from speaking to singing.
Moreover, the characters in *Oliver Twist* possess the romantic qualities necessary to make this transition. It is not difficult to imagine Oliver Twist, the Artful Dodger, Fagin, Nancy, Sikes, and Mr. Bumble using music as a means of expression given that these characters, as written by Dickens, already possess grand qualities that make them seem larger than life. Furthermore, the diversity of idioms presented in *Oliver Twist* allowed Bart to experiment with different types of music and melodies for the various characters. Finally, the flexibility of the story, as epitomized by the variety of film and stage adaptations, meant that Bart could create an adaptation that preserved the memorable moments in the novel but that simultaneously opened up the source so as to allow for the incorporation of music.

Bart first began work on *Oliver!* in 1958. Tellingly, his initial work on the adaptation revolved around the songs, and his primary focus in writing the score to *Oliver!* reflected his early songwriting roots: “Following the success of the Tommy Steele movies, Bart had originally conceived and written a few *Oliver!* songs for the chirpy heartthrob with an eye to making another film” (Roper 38). Bart shelved the project when he began work on *Fings*, and it seems clear that the songwriter’s involvement with this unique stage show ultimately helped to reshape his approach to the *Oliver Twist* musical when he returned to it that same year. Bart now conceived of *Oliver!* as a stage show, though, like *Fings* before it, *Oliver!* would be an innovative show—a British musical the likes of which nobody had seen before. For certain, the success of *Fings* had demonstrated that audiences would not reject a show that operated in a lower-class idiom, even though this idiom was the precise opposite of the operatic style that had dominated Britain’s musical theater scene during the years of Coward and Novello’s greatest successes. The lyrical Cockney songs of *Fings* would serve as important predecessors to several numbers in *Oliver!*, most notably, those sung by Nancy and
the Artful Dodger. Even those characters in *Oliver!* who are not depicted as Cockneys are touched by this element, for a pervasive Cockney energy, as represented by the depiction of London in all its boisterous musicality, dominates the musical.

Though Bart saw great promise in the *Twist* project, the producers and theater managers with whom he shared his ideas were far less enthusiastic. In his retrospective article, Bart recalls that “twelve managements turned it down after I began writing it in 1958, rejecting it as morbid” (par. 2). The death of Nancy was particularly troubling for many producers, and given that the last major adaptation of *Twist* had been the David Lean film, it is not at all surprising that people were skeptical of a musical version of what was now widely perceived to be an incredibly dark story. Bart eventually managed to find a supporter in the prominent theater impresario Donald Albery. Albery and Bart were mutual friends of Joan Littlewood, and just as Albery had proved himself a loyal supporter of Theatre Workshop, helping to transfer many of Littlewood’s shows to the West End, he likewise proved to be a driving force behind the success of *Oliver!*

Albery, who had not yet been knighted for his services to the theater when he first met Bart, came from an old theatrical family. He was the second child and first son of the prominent theater owner and impresario Sir Bronson Albery and his wife Una Gwynn. Following his education in Switzerland, Donald joined the family business, assisting with the management of the three family theaters: the Criterion, Wyndham’s, and the New Theatre—the theater that would eventually serve as the location for the West End premiere of *Oliver!* (Trewin 584). Like his father before him, Donald was willing to take risks in producing plays, though their tastes regarding what made for good theater were somewhat divergent; whereas Bronson preferred the classics, Donald was a modernist (Trewin 584). This would
sometimes create conflicts within the family regarding Donald’s choice of material. When he first tried producing Graham Greene’s controversial play, *The Living Room*, he had trouble finding a venue for staging this production—this despite the fact that his family controlled three theaters. Eventually, his family agreed to produce the show at Wyndham’s, and it became one of his first big successes (Saunders 223). Eager to pursue further theatrical projects as a producer, Albery eventually formed his own production company: Donmar. Ultimately, he was responsible for the first West End production of *Waiting for Godot*; Albery thus became known for his innovative theatrical endeavors. This is not to say that the impresario was only interested in the artistic elements of theater—he was also a businessman with a keen sense of how to create commercial successes. Fundamentally, it was his business know-how that allowed him to explore the commercial potential in avant-garde shows, such as those produced by Theatre Workshop.

Throughout the latter part of the 1950s, Donald Albery played a significant role in supporting Littlewood’s troupe; it was another bold move on the part of the impresario, for Littlewood and her company were still being marginalized by many traditionalists. Albery later commented that “the press had never made me feel I ought to go to Theatre Workshop. They had the reputation of being a left-wing theatre and the attitude of established West End managements seemed to be prejudiced against them” (qtd. in “Theatrical Manager” 3). Thus, when Theatre Workshop first began to attain true mainstream notice and greater financial success shortly thereafter, it was at least partially the result of the producer’s activities. The West End transfers of many Workshop shows were carried out under his supervision.

It was through Littlewood that Albery first became familiar with Lionel Bart. Tellingly, Albery was convinced to invest in *Oliver!*, then an unfinished show, simply by listening to a
tape of Bart and his secretary singing the songs that the composer had written—a genuine testament to Bart’s magnetic musical creativity (Ganzl British 770). Even the score was incomplete at this point, however. Bart had only written six songs: “Food, Glorious Food,” “I’d Do Anything,” “Reviewing the Situation,” “Consider Yourself,” “Who Will Buy?” and “As Long As He Needs Me” (Roper 41). The final score would include ten additional songs and numerous transitions/reprises. In spite of the fact that he was investing in an incomplete show, Albery took an option on Oliver! for the sum of £400 in May of 1959 (Jenkins letter to Jacobsen, par. 1).

Albery clearly believed in Oliver! (and Lionel Bart) from the very beginning, though understandably, most of his early hopes for the musical rested on the appeal of its score, specifically, the songs that Bart had played for him. In a letter to Frederick Carter, then the manager of Her Majesty’s Theatre, Albery described Oliver! as “an absolute certainty,” and noted that “[Bart] quite apart from being in the Top Ten with ‘Fings,’ has also been right at the top with ‘Living Doll,’ etc. The score is extremely commercial and catchy, and the script, I think, very funny. If this is not a success, I don’t know what will be” (par. 3). Part of Albery’s optimism in this letter obviously relates to the fact that he was interested in persuading Carter to host Oliver! at his theater; other letters by Albery to potential backers display a similarly optimistic tone. Nevertheless, Albery’s belief that Oliver! would succeed was grounded in genuine conviction regarding Bart’s talents.

The impresario’s chief task in the early stages of the production was working to find the backing necessary to produce Oliver!, though Albery would take an active role in many other

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9 This list of songs seems to contradict Bart’s assertion that “Where is Love?” was the musical centerpiece of the show, for it was not part of the original group of songs that the composer wrote. Nevertheless, it is possible that Bart had a conceptual idea of a song for Oliver that would express such sentiments and had simply not yet completed the number. Given the lack of surviving draft materials relating to Oliver!, it is impossible to know for certain when and how “Where is Love?” was conceived.
elements of the pre-production process as well. *Oliver!* had a relatively modest budget of £15,000, and one of Albery’s greatest strengths as a businessman was knowing how to keep costs down. Achieving such a feat with *Oliver!* was doubly difficult given the fact that it was both a musical and a period piece. Ultimately, Albery was able to raise £14,350 from a diverse group of backers that included family members, fellow producers, and prominent aristocrats. Albery’s skills at raising funds were matched by his skills at cutting costs. When the show was ready for its West End debut, the production actually came in under budget (see Tables 2.1 and 2.2).

Though Bart was hard at work on the score to *Oliver!* and Albery was just as busy tending to financial matters, both men were actively involved in the process of finding a director. Since *Oliver!* was not yet complete, the director’s position would be fundamentally collaborative; working closely with Bart, who was still laboring on the show, would be a necessity. Fortunately, the experimentalist mentality of the 1950s had encouraged such improvisational collaboration amongst the creative minds behind various theatrical projects—the success of *Fings* had depended entirely on the cooperative efforts of Bart, Norman, Littlewood, and the various cast members. Although *Oliver!* would prove to be a timeless musical, its journey to the stage was largely a result of the innovative time period in which it was produced.

Nevertheless, Albery’s initial endeavors regarding the production of *Oliver!* were not confined to British theatrical tendencies or trends. Rather, since the musical was still viewed as a genre dominated by Americans, it is not surprising that the impresario’s first instinct regarding possible directorial candidates for *Oliver!* was to turn to an American source: Broadway producer David Merrick. A telegram from Albery to Merrick sent on June 26,
Table 2.1: Backers List for Oliver!

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<th>Backer</th>
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<td>R.B. Barker</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Mrs. C. Sawyer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mrs. D.C. Boys</td>
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<td>Ian Albery</td>
<td>150</td>
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<td>Acropolis, Ltd.</td>
<td>200</td>
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<td>Herbert de Leon, Ltd.</td>
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<td>New Play Ventures, Ltd.</td>
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<td>H.H. Wingate</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dame Margot Fonteyn (Southern Maid Ltd.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emile Littler</td>
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<td>Gluckman Theatres</td>
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<td>Hammer Enterprises</td>
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<tr>
<td>Northcote Investment Co., Ltd.</td>
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<td>Carlton Trust Ltd.</td>
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<td>Port Tennant Co. Ltd.</td>
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Table 2.2: Production Budget for Oliver!

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<td>Designer – Sean Kenny</td>
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<td>Choreographers – Eleanor Fazan</td>
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<td>– Malcom Clare</td>
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<td>– Eric Lambert</td>
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<td>– Misc.</td>
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<td>London week 1 expenses</td>
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**Total**                                      | **14,726**

Data taken from the Sir Donald Albery Collection in the UT Austin Harry Ransom Center’s performing arts archive, folders 114.002, 114.003, 403.028.
1959 reflects Albery’s eagerness to find an American director: “Can you suggest any first class American musical comedy director who might be unexpectedly free this autumn capable of directing Dickens [sic] Oliver Twist as musical. Enormous possibilities. Score really hot stuff. Any suggestions greatly appreciated” (lines 1-5). Merrick replied a week later to inform Albery that almost all of the top American musical directors were swamped with projects which were set to open that year. With the option of finding an American director off the table, Albery turned his attention back to his native Britain.

Naturally, Joan Littlewood was an early candidate for the post—she had worked closely with both Bart and Albery previously, and the creative projects undertaken by Theatre Workshop in the past seemed fitting precursors to Oliver! By the late 1950s, however, Littlewood was busy with her own endeavors, as Theatre Workshop had gained more mainstream attention than ever before. As such, working with Littlewood would mean setting up Oliver! at the Theatre Royal in Stratford before transferring it to the West End. By August of 1959, Albery and Littlewood had discussed the possibility of her taking on Oliver! and the prospect of her doing so seemed tenable, though Bart was wary of some of the difficulties inherent in staging what he had conceived as a large-scale show in a small-scale theater. The Theatre Royal could seat only 460 patrons and was known for producing intimate plays, not ornate musicals.

The issue of Littlewood directing Oliver! in Stratford eventually became moot, as scheduling conflicts between Littlewood’s other projects and Oliver! seemed unavoidable. With the Littlewood option off the table, Albery turned to yet another British director who was known to both himself and Bart: Peter Coe. Coe had worked with Bart previously on Lock Up Your Daughters, and with Albery on The World of Suzie Wong, a straight play first
produced on Broadway in 1958 and transferred to the West End in 1959. Though the
director’s reputation had grown immeasurably as a result of his work on these plays, Coe was
still fairly inexperienced when it came to musicals. His work as the director of Oliver! would
not only establish the definitive staging of Bart’s musical, but it would likewise establish him
as one of the foremost directorial talents in British musical theater. Sadly, the full degree of
Coe’s contributions to Oliver! is not known, though they extended well beyond the blocking
of the show. A letter from Albery to Milton Goldman dated March 28, 1960 notes that “the
script [to Oliver!] has now been partly rewritten by Peter Coe” (par. 1) though there is no
record of what changes the director made to the book. In spite of this lack of formal credit, it
is impossible to deny that Coe was instrumental to the success of Oliver! both onstage and
behind the scenes.

With Coe onboard, it seemed only natural that Sean Kenny would be invited to join the
production team. Today, Kenny’s contributions to Oliver! are remembered as having been
vital to the musical’s appeal—in fact, Kenny’s work on the show was arguably the crucial
element, as his revolving scenery inspired the set design for many prominent musicals
produced in the decades following Oliver! Kenny’s set is also particularly important to
consider in the context of the Brechtian movement that shaped British theater in the 1950s
and 60s. Though Oliver! may not have directly fit in with the Brechtian discourse that was
dominating the British stage at the time, its set was regarded as one of the foremost examples
of Brechtian staging in the history of the British theater. Furthermore, the Brecht movement
in England was limited mostly to ideas about what Brecht stood for as opposed to a direct
understanding of what Brecht was advocating. Thus, elements of theatrical production such
as scenery and staging sometimes proved inestimably more conducive to displaying the
impact of Brecht on the English stage than any other means of expression. As Martin Esslin notes, “because hardly anyone in the English theater knows any German, [Brecht’s] impact chiefly manifested itself in those spheres that remained unaffected by the language barrier: in stage design and lighting and in the use of music. Indeed, as far as design is concerned, one can safely say that practically all British stage design…today derives from the work of the main Brechtian designers” (149). Rather than confining the design of a set to the tenets of realism, the driving principles behind Brechtian staging are “flexibility and mobility” (Esslin 149), and these two qualities were essential to Kenny’s vision of the set for Oliver! Through the use of a multi-level revolve, Kenny succeeded in creating a set that could be transformed into any one of the play’s innumerable locations simply by rotating: the workhouse, Corney’s parlour, Sowerberry’s shop, the streets of London, Fagin’s den, Brownlow’s house, the Three Cripples saloon, and even London Bridge were all created without bringing on new scenery. Rather, the single Kenny set, through its almost uncanny ability to unfold and refold itself into different shapes, provided all that was necessary for these locations to come to life onstage.

Kenny’s design for Oliver!, like so many facets of this British play and many of its predecessors in the 1950s, was the result of improvisation and collaboration, as Kenny and Coe worked together closely on the design of the show—Coe’s ideas for the blocking and the dramatic arc of the musical helped to mold Kenny’s vision for the set, a vision that was grounded squarely on the principle of mobility: “I walked through the old parts of London. What I visualized was a great millwheel—an enormous turning thing—with wooden beams, bridges across streets, heavy wooden doors” (qtd. in Eichelbaum 20). Thus, for all of its modernism and technological innovations, the Kenny set was Dickensian—the use of
wooden rafters, beams, and staircases that lead up and down to strange, terrifying spaces is particularly evocative of the settings that Dickens himself created in many novels. It was Kenny’s walks about the old London streets that allowed him to gain an appreciation for the very concept of “Dickensian London.”

The economy and fluidity of Kenny’s design were perhaps the most impressive elements of the final product. Instead of having to rely on new pieces of scenery being brought on and off each time the curtain closed, Kenny designed a set that made it possible for scene changes to take place before the audience. This necessitated further improvisation on the part of both Coe and Bart, for changing the set in front of the audience required a constant stream of both music and activity so as to keep the crowd entertained even as the set was rotating. Kenny viewed the future of set design as revolving around this concept of a fully visible and movable set as opposed to the traditional use of the curtain and sliding flats: “The idea is to try to stop the idea that everybody should wait while the scene changes. The stage should be free from that—and if we have to get rid of scenery and just use lighting, then we still have to do just that. We must put a stop to all this business of big heavy trucks coming in and darkness for half an hour while they change the flats behind the curtain” (qtd. in Roper 42-43). Several short songs and movements in Oliver! were written by Bart expressly for the purpose of filling the gap while the set changed.

Besides his contributions to the script and set design, Coe also assisted Albery and Bart with the task of finding a suitable venue for Oliver!’s debut, and likewise, for its West End transfer. The primary difficulties in settling on a location for Oliver! related to the set, which was so massive and complex that it would not have worked on a small stage. Eventually, it was decided that the play would hold previews at the Wimbledon Theatre; the New Theatre
would then serve as the location for the West End debut of Oliver! Years later, after it had already been renamed the Albery Theatre, it would again play host to Bart’s show. The revival would be a happy homecoming for all those involved, including a young Cameron Mackintosh.

As all of these behind the scenes elements were beginning to take shape, Albery and Bart were also turning their attention to the equally important casting decisions. Discussing the casting of Oliver! presents an interesting situation given the fact that two of the play’s four lead characters, Oliver Twist and the Artful Dodger, are roles meant to be played by young people. However, because of the strenuous nature of live theater, the stringent laws regarding child performers on the English stage, and the unavoidable fact that children tend to grow up quickly, there was always a sense of evanescence regarding these parts throughout Oliver!’s initial West End run. By the end of his first year in the role of Oliver, Keith Hamshere, the young actor who originated the part, had grown too tall for the role. Hamshere was thus the first in a long line of Olivers to come up against a foe more terrifying than Bill Sikes: puberty.

The number of Olivers and Dodgers cast over the months and years of the show’s run is striking. In the case of Oliver, as soon as a young performer grew to over four feet-ten inches tall, he was replaced by a newer, shorter actor. By the end of its initial West End run, the show had worked its way through at least thirteen different Olivers and their understudies (Ganzl British 777).

Given the heavy turnover associated with the roles of Oliver and the Dodger, the adult roles of Nancy and Fagin seem more consequential when discussing the actors who originated the parts, particularly in the case of the latter. Georgia Brown, who was cast in the
role of Nancy, had experienced an upbringing that was decidedly reminiscent of Lionel Bart’s early years. Like Bart, she was born in the East End to Jewish immigrants; like Bart, she left London during the Blitz; like Bart, she changed her name upon entering show business—she was born Lillian Clair Laizer Getel Klot and took her stage name from the songs “Sweet Georgia Brown” and “Georgia on My Mind” (Barron A14). Bart had actually known Brown since childhood, and although the part of Nancy was not written with her in mind, she did seem somehow destined for the role. An obituary in the New York Times would later recount the peculiar circumstances surrounding her audition for the part: “Lionel Bart had grown up in the same neighborhood and recognized her when she walked in, shouting the name he knew her by. Flustered, she took a moment to respond, since she was no longer Lily Klot. But after seeing her perform, he decided she was just what he needed” (Barron A14). To this day, Brown remains the definitive Nancy for many fans of Oliver!—not only did she originate the role in the West End, but she also played the part in the first Broadway production three years later. Like most members of the original cast, however, Brown did not reprise her role in the 1968 motion picture adaptation. Consequently, we are left without any true archival recording of her performing Nancy, though she did make an appearance on the Ed Sullivan Show to sing “As Long As He Needs Me” during Oliver!’s initial Broadway run in 1964.\(^\text{10}\) Nevertheless, Brown’s enduring power in the role has not been inhibited by her absence from the film adaptation.

Even more assured is Ron Moody’s legacy in the part of Fagin. In fact, Moody’s popularity in the role of the merry old gentleman has become almost transcendent, as though every single version of the character must be judged in comparison to Moody’s definitive

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\(^{10}\) Ironically, Shani Wallis, who would replace Brown in the film, was discovered by the film’s producers while singing on Sullivan as well.
performance. Given this transcendence, it seems impossible to believe that he almost did not get the part. Surprisingly, Moody was not high on Bart or Albery’s list of potential Fagins when casting began. According to Roper, it was Peter Coe who ultimately recommended Moody for the role (40), though both Albery and Bart were hesitant. While Albery quickly changed his mind, Bart remained cautious regarding Moody, and the conflict over whether or not to cast him was one of the more contentious issues raised during pre-production (Ganzl British 770). Though Bart eventually dropped his protestations, he would remain highly mistrustful of Moody’s approach to the character for months thereafter.

The hiring of Moody was the single most important casting decision relating to the show, not only for this initial production, but likewise, for the legacy of Oliver! In many ways, the enduring popularity of Oliver! is intertwined with the enduring popularity of Moody’s Fagin, an interpretation which has exerted a significant effect on the culture text of Oliver Twist. Many Fagins in subsequent adaptations of the novel have borrowed heavily from Moody’s approach to the character—indeed, Fagin would never be the same again following the premiere of Oliver! (see Chapter 4).

Ron Moody was born Ronald Moodnick, thus making him the third of three talented Jewish artists (all of whom adopted less ethnic stage names) whose contributions were essential to the first production of Oliver! Before taking up acting, Moody studied sociology at the London School of Economics, “which may or may not have given him a taste for the great number of years he spent impersonating the variety of mankind in revue” (“Ron Moody,” par. 3). Revue was indeed the theatrical format through which Moody first found success; according to his program, bio he was first discovered while performing in a revue show at L.S.E. (par. 1). It was writer Peter Myers, soon to become a close associate of
Moody’s, who first offered him a part in one of the Intimate Review shows at the New Lindsey Theatre: “For the next six years Moody played exclusively in revues, all of which proved very successful commercially” (par. 4). Though little archival material survives from these performances, Moody earned a reputation as both a gifted impressionist and a popular comedic performer.

Much has been written about Moody’s performance as Fagin, but perhaps Sheridan Morley puts it best in his text on the history of the British musical, as he links Moody to several other gifted stage performers who attained a certain immortality through their definitive portrayals of memorable musical characters in the West End:

Ron Moody’s Fagin still stands alongside Topol’s Tevye in Fiddler on the Roof and Angela Lansbury’s Rose in Gypsy as one of the very few performances created in a West End musical (rather than transferred there from New York) which can truly stand in comparison with Channing’s Dolly, with Mary Martin’s Nellie Forbush in South Pacific, or with Streisand’s Funny Girl at the very head and heart of great acting in big band shows. Moody will never do anything in his career that is better than that Fagin, and there will never be a musical Fagin that good: the part defines the career and the career is dominated by the part, one he also happily immortalized in the film version (far and way the best ever made of a British musical and also…the most successful at the box office). (Spread 154)

As Morley points out, there is a sense of symbiosis regarding Moody’s Fagin in that Moody will forever be remembered for his performance as the merry old gentleman, and simultaneously, in that every Fagin must be evaluated against Moody’s depiction. From the beginning, it seemed as though the actor fully embodied the character. Though Bart had been uncertain about using Moody and remained confrontational regarding various touches that Moody added to the character, he later admitted that the actor took up the role quickly: “When we told him he had to play this Jewish mother-hen—a cross between a leprechaun and a pied-piper—he handled it very well” (qtd. in Roper 40). The combination of Moody’s
comedic talents, knack for impressions, revue show roots, and musical gifts all contributed to the success of his performance.

Despite the fact that he is forever associated with the part, Moody only played Fagin for one short year of *Oliver!*’s initial six-year run in the West End. In an interview with the *Daily Mail*, Moody explained his reasons for leaving at the end of the first year, claiming that “Fagin is a very demanding part. I can’t relax for a moment, and I use up a lot of nervous and physical energy. So I need a rest” (par. 2). Furthermore, unlike Georgia Brown, he did not participate in the initial Broadway production of *Oliver!*; the role of Fagin was taken up by Clive Revill, who approached the character in a very different way, due in part to the fact that he was playing the role in front of a very different audience with a very different cultural tradition. That Moody was able to achieve such notoriety in a role that he played for only a year is a testament to his natural chemistry in the part. However, looking back at his revue-show roots, perhaps the key to Moody’s success as Fagin was the diversity that he brought to the role: Moody’s Fagin is hero and villain, clown and corrupter, song-man and sinner, angel and devil. In some ways, he is *Oliver!*’s central antagonist, drawing him into the world of the criminals. In other ways, he is a co-protagonist who manages to steal the show right out from under the title character’s nose. Moody’s ability to capture the multifaceted elements of the character proved both entertaining and culturally significant.

Albery and Bart had managed to assemble an unquestionably talented cast and equally proficient production crew for *Oliver!* The show eventually entered a brief three-week rehearsal period in the spring of 1960 during the weeks leading up to the Wimbledon premiere in June. Surprisingly, the initial staging of the musical at the Wimbledon Theatre did not inspire as much confidence in the project as Albery had anticipated. The difficulties
involved in staging a major musical were multiplied by the complexity of Kenny’s scenery, and moreover, by the improvisational approach that was still being taken to the script and score as a result of having to stage the show on the Kenny set. By the time the show had finished its rehearsal period, Bart was still writing songs and music to fill out the score for the scene changes, curtain calls, and various other points in the script; in fact, the score was still incomplete when the show began its previews at the Wimbledon in June. Comic actor Barry Humphries, who would go on to play Fagin later in his career and understudied the role for the original production, was cast as the morbid Mr. Sowerberry, and Bart decided to create a song specifically for him. “That’s Your Funeral” was thus written while the show was already running (Bart “Worldwide,” par. 5). After Wimbledon, numerous changes were still being made to the script, score, and blocking, despite the fact that the show was set for its West End debut in a matter of days.

Donald Albery still believed in the project, though he was also frustrated with the fact that Wimbledon had not gone as well as it could have. Joan Littlewood and Gerry MacColl had attended the debut performance at Wimbledon and sent Albery words of encouragement, but his reply letter revealed his frustrations with Oliver!’s awkward premiere. Before closing his letter, Albery added, “there is no reason why the show should not be a big success, but of course nobody can be quite sure of anything these days” (par. 2), a somewhat more fatalistic assessment compared to the optimism of his early letters regarding the project. The advance sales for tickets were underwhelming, and the question of whether Oliver! would prove the great musical that Bart and Albery had envisioned seemed more ambivalent than ever. Peter Saunders notes that by this point, Albery was less confident regarding the potential of the project and gave the show a 50-50 chance (Saunders 223). Tellingly, no opening night
festivities were planned. Fortunately, the opening night of Oliver! would present its own sense of revelry.

Oliver! premiered at the New Theatre on June 30, 1960 at 7:30 PM. Though Bart had always maintained a great deal of confidence regarding the project, his nerves were raw and he told a reporter that if anything went wrong during the show, he would leave the theater (Roper 44). It was a prophetic statement. As Bart sat nervously in an aisle seat to watch his creation unfold, he was horrified early on in the first act when one piece of scenery attached to the revolve did not move as it was supposed to: “Predicting disaster, I decided to leave and take a walk around London” (“Worldwide,” par. 6). Of course, the audience was completely unaware that anything had gone wrong as the actors, now used to working on the Kenny set, were able to cover up the mistake. Still, it was too much for the show’s creator to endure. By the time he returned to the theater later that evening, the show was over. There was noise of a hullabaloo inside the New, and Albery navigated his way outside to greet the composer, insisting that he enter the theater (Roper 3). Bart found himself witness to an enormous standing ovation—one that had lasted a full eighteen curtain calls and a seemingly countless number of reprises (Ganzl British 771). In a note to his friend Roger Stevens written two short days after the premiere, Albery ecstatically recounted the electric response to Oliver!’s West End debut: “The play has had the most vociferous reception I ever remember in London. The whole house was cheering and would have stayed all night with reprise after reprise if we would have let them” (par. 1). Nevertheless, even after all the reprises had been sung and all the bows had been taken, the audience still would not leave and continued its boisterous shouts of “Author!” and “Speech!” Bart immediately thanked his mother, and also humbly thanked Dickens himself, stating, “may the Good Dickens forgive us” (qtd. in
Roper 3). His apologetic words were a testament to the fact that he understood how thoroughly he had modified his source, though given the reaction of the crowd, it seemed no apology was necessary.

The opening night of Oliver! inaugurated an astounding six-year run in the West End that would play a record-breaking total of 2,618 performances (Ganzl British 777). Oliver! thus proved to be more than just a passing craze, as the fanfare surrounding the show would last well beyond its opening night. For certain, Oliver! was the hottest ticket in town for the duration of its West End run, and both critics and audiences were left asking for more following the final curtain call. It is never guaranteed that the public and professional critics will reach a consensus on the merits of a theatrical production, and yet, in the case of Oliver! both general theatergoers and the news media seemed enamored of Bart’s adaptation.

Given the phenomenal success and popularity of Oliver!, it was immediately clear that the perception of Dickens’s Oliver Twist would never be the same again. While the deviation of the musical from the novel held little meaning for the countless children who saw Oliver!, adults and critics familiar with Dickens’s works were clearly aware of the fact that Bart had created a very loose adaptation. Nevertheless, the appreciation of British audiences for Oliver! in the face of its divergences from its source is one of the most fascinating elements surrounding the reception of Oliver! in the UK; nobody seemed to mind just how widely Oliver! differed from Oliver Twist. But how is it that the British, so protective of Dickens as a cultural institution, came to embrace a play that modified the “Inimitable Boz” so significantly?

Clearly, Bart’s Englishness was an important factor here—indeed, it is perhaps the main factor. Had an American composer created Oliver!, the reaction in Britain would not have
been nearly as positive, though truthfully, an American composer could never have created *Oliver!* Bart’s Englishness is what allowed for the British elements of the adaptation to emerge despite his working in a genre that was still dominated by Americans, and *Oliver!* is clearly a British musical. For English audiences, *Oliver!* was thus a double triumph; not only had Bart created an entertaining version of a novel by a fundamentally British author, but he had succeeded in writing a show that had just as much appeal as any American musical.

Assessing the response to *Oliver!* in England, one finds a palpable sense of pride in the reactions of many critics. Bernard Levin of the *Daily Express* wrote that “it is a very long time indeed since I came out of the theatre after a musical whistling the tunes. So before all else I salute Mr. Lionel Bart—who has also written the book and lyrics of this, the most ambitious British musical of recent years—for his score” (pars. 1-2). Levin was just one of many critics who chose to focus on the Englishness of *Oliver!* in his review; practically every critic who reviewed Bart’s show took the time to comment on the fact that *Oliver!* was a *British* musical. Though *Oliver!* would go on to enjoy acclaim all over the world, its Englishness was more than a secondary trait—for the British theatergoer, it was a fundamental cause for celebration.

In an article entitled “Everyone Will Ask For More,” Robert Muller of the *Daily Mail* showered praise upon Bart’s play: “After the gruesome inadequacy of some recent musicals, how good to welcome one which is entirely successful!” (par. 1). The critic proudly and boldly asserts that *Oliver!* is “as professional as anything the Americans have sent us” (par. 3), thus labeling Bart’s show as the first true counterattack against the American invasion precipitated by *Oklahoma!* Muller goes on to characterize *Oliver!* as “a *British* musical that will and must charm audiences all over the world” (emphases added, par. 8). Muller’s use of
the adjective “British” before the noun “musical” indicates that the critic clearly understood that he had witnessed something very important the night that he watched Oliver!, for Oliver! was more than just a great musical: it was a great British musical—perhaps the first truly spectacular British musical produced since before World War II when American shows were already starting to dominate the West End. Muller also realized that Oliver!, unlike any British musical that had been produced previously, had true potential for international fame. Whereas Novello wrote British musicals whose appeal was limited to European tastes, and The Boy Friend was modified heavily before it found success on Broadway, Bart had succeeded in creating a show that could (and would) be enjoyed “all over the world.”

Most British critics seemed elated at the possibility of England finally making its mark on musical theater. The very week after Oliver! was released, an article in the Evening News asserted that the battle was on for the rights to the Broadway production: “It must be a very long time since the Americans showed so much interest in a British musical as they are doing for ‘Oliver!’ A week after it opened it is still getting cheers every night and anything from 15 to 20 curtain calls” (par. 2). These articles indicate that the praise being heaped on Oliver! was more than just simple admiration for a new musical; there was a pervasive sense of patriotism involved in the support being given to the show. This almost nationalistic reaction is highlighted by the fact that several members of the royal family repeatedly went to see the show over the course of its run, including the Queen Mother, Princess Margaret, Prince Philip, the Duchess of Gloucester, Princess Anne, the Duke of Windsor, and Queen Elizabeth herself.

Another intriguing characteristic of many of the initial English reviews of Oliver! is the way in which critics assessed Oliver! as a Dickensian adaptation. Again, given the
traditional British view of Dickens as more than a mere British novelist, but simultaneously, as an English institution, one might assume that many English critics would have been less than enthusiastic about Bart modifying Dickens so heavily and setting him to music.

Nevertheless, the general reaction to the Dickensian element of Bart’s show was remarkably positive. An anonymous reviewer for the *Liverpool Post* offered perhaps the highest praise that any critic could heap on Bart’s play, asserting: “This was real Dickens” (5). Muller praised the libretto to *Oliver!* as “a clean-cut book no more than…a strip-cartoon version of *Oliver Twist,* that nevertheless manages to be so succinct, so true to the spirit of the original, so neatly constructed that it makes everybody ask for more” (par. 3). “True to the spirit” is the classic phrase used for justifying adaptations that stray far from the original source, but more important than Muller’s somewhat clichéd assessment is his willingness to justify *Oliver!* as a Dickensian adaptation in spite of this straying. For Muller, *Oliver!* was still artistic and praiseworthy even if it was a “strip-cartoon” version of Dickens’s novel. T.C. Worsley likewise praised Bart for his fidelity to the novel, even if this fidelity was more “spiritual” than literal, and numerous other British critics expressed the exact same sentiment. J.C. Trewin wrote that “the musical play is Dickensian in its spirit, if not the letter, so I do not believe that Mr. Bart will be haunted by a bearded shade with a geranium in its buttonhole….I believe that Dickens will always be mined. When an explorer comes up with such riches as Mr. Bart has found…the task seems worth-while” (par. 10). Through his exploration of Dickens’s musical potential, Bart created the possibility for a bold new period of musical theater. The stagnant waters of the musical stage were now starting to flow again in the West End.

If the British were able to appreciate *Oliver!* because of its Dickensian roots and its
pioneering spirit, they were likewise able to place it within the context of the experimentalism that had helped to define 1950’s English theater. *Oliver!* was clearly a groundbreaking show, and given the fact that the adaptation was appreciated as both a Dickensian piece and as a musical, two seemingly incongruous forms of entertainment brought together with tremendous success, it is understandable that the experimental nature of *Oliver!* was of great importance to its acclaim. In some ways, *Oliver!* seemed the culmination of the innovative spirit that had driven the British theatrical scene through the 1950s. Though Bart’s talents as a writer of popular songs were fundamental to the success of the production, the project itself might never have taken shape had he not been involved with the radical elements in post-World War II theater.

Numerous critics perceived the experimentalist and Brechtian elements of *Oliver!*, and they commented on these elements in their reviews of the show. In his article, Worsley singled out Joan Littlewood for her contributions to the theater, claiming that *Oliver!* might never have emerged had it not been for her influence: “Here we see the latest experiments in writing and staging breaking through to create something charming, fresh and vivid. For to give everyone their due we must say that this quite new, very English kind of musical couldn’t have happened in just this way if it hadn’t been for Miss Joan Littlewood and all the vitality she has put into English stagecraft” (par. 2). Of course, Littlewood had not actually contributed directly to the production, but, as Worsley poetically put it “the light that she let in on the English stage scene pervades it, and a very exciting and exhilarating light it is” (par. 2). The fact that Littlewood had been fundamentally involved with the production of Bart’s first truly successful experimentalist musical underscores Worsley’s point, and the innovative spirit of Theatre Workshop does seem to be an almost palpable element at work in *Oliver!*,
particularly when one considers the collaborative effort responsible for the gestation of the musical. Worsley concludes his review with praise for *Oliver!*, but simultaneously, praise for the pioneering tendencies and attitudes that allowed for this gestation: “The combined talents which have gone into bringing off this triumph are among the youngest and most adventurous the theatre has thrown up lately” (par. 9).

Other critics detected the same air of experimentalism about *Oliver!* and attributed it to the more pervasive inventiveness of the Brechtian-influenced English theater scene of the 1950s and 60s. An article in the *London Times* noted that *Oliver!* itself, while a product of this experimentalism, would simultaneously help to feed the spirit that had allowed it to develop:

…it is, perhaps, this new intellectualism which has led those active in the musical theatre to turn to books rather than to plays for their raw material. A composer has more difficulty in making a statement of his own through the medium of somebody else’s play than through a novel, for to turn a play into a musical is a task for a composer whose ambition is to dwell on what the dramatist has already said. It is probably for this reason that in creating *Oliver!* Mr. Bart avoided the existing dramatizations and returned to the novel. (9)

Of course, Bart was writing in an historical tradition, and the culture text of *Twist*, as shaped by the countless adaptations that preceded *Oliver!*, played a significant role in the creation of the musical. Nevertheless, no single preexisting version of *Twist*, not even the Lean film, served as the true source of the project; fundamentally, Bart was writing his own revolutionary adaptation. Nothing of its scale, scope, or spirit had ever been seen before.

*Oliver!* was indeed experimental, and perhaps the most obvious analogy would be to compare it to a chemistry experiment, for it was only through the combination of a wide variety of ingredients that Bart was able to create his magnum opus. The original Dickens text, the cultural perceptions of the story, the trends in British theater, the history of the music hall, and the songwriting abilities of Lionel Bart were all fundamental ingredients in
the concoction of the musical, and the combination of these elements proved both innovative and entertaining. Placing a Dickens novel into a musical format was just one of many odd mixtures necessitated by Bart’s writing of *Oliver!*, and several equally interesting mergers were also fundamental.

The combination of a British source and songs written by a British composer with the form and style of an American book musical is perhaps the most interesting merger that takes place in *Oliver!*, for it is not only stylistic, but simultaneously, transatlantic. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Lionel Bart had to negotiate several distinctive boundaries in the creation of *Oliver!* How does a composer preserve the Englishness of an essentially British source when operating in an American form? Clearly, Bart had his own Englishness on his side, and it was easy for many to perceive the show as a “British musical” given that it had been written by an East Ender. It is doubtful that the show would have been embraced by critics, nor hailed as revolutionary, if it had been viewed as just another American musical that found success in the West End.

Unlike the operatic British musicals of the early twentieth century, in which songs are decorative and diegetic as opposed to fundamental, *Oliver!* contains a score that is fully incorporated into the story being told. As Kurt Ganzl notes, one of *Oliver!’s* greatest strengths is the unity between the score and the story: “It was a score where every part contributed to the whole and to the show, and yet stood up as an individual piece in its own right” (*British* 773). Similarly, the anonymous author of the *Times* article comments on the importance of the structure of the American-style musical to British perceptions of musical theater in general following World War II: “Since the war…the musical has often looked for considerably more solid foundations; it demands that songs and dances appear with dramatic
relevance, and a doctrine seems to have developed to the point at which it can be hotly argued that neither is permissible unless it carry the narrative forward” (9). Here, the author is clearly articulating the influence of American trends on British musical theater, and a review of the Oliver! soundtrack in Plays and Players praised Lionel Bart for having written a show in which the songs were fully integrated: “This is a show in which story, characterisation, atmosphere, production and music are each of equal importance—which is as things should be in a stage musical” (par. 1). The reviewer claims that every successful British musical produced in the early 1960s had adopted this format, and Oliver! was certainly the most successful of all the English musicals produced in this period to employ this technique.

Practically every song in Oliver! serves a purpose in the overall shape of the show, whether it is to move the story forward, reveal the inner workings of the mind of a character, or underscore a theme. “Food, Glorious Food,” “Consider Yourself,” and “Who Will Buy?” introduce the different environments in which Oliver is placed over the course of the musical that bears his name, and each number helps to set the tone for this particular environment. Other songs are character driven, as the major solo numbers all help the audience to better understand these individuals and their motivations: “Where is Love?” reveals Oliver’s desire for affection; “As Long As He Needs Me” emphasizes Nancy’s unhealthy devotion to Sikes; “Reviewing the Situation” presents a vulnerable side to Fagin; and “My Name” introduces Sikes’s fearsome brutality.11 Still other songs reinforce the thematic elements in the story: “Oliver!” and “That’s Your Funeral” underscore the melancholy morbidity of Oliver’s life in the workhouse, and later, with Mr. Sowerberry, while “Pick a Pocket or Two,” “It’s a Fine

11 In early versions of the libretto and score to Oliver!, Bart spelled the housebreaker’s name with a “y.” For consistency, Dickens’s original spelling of the character’s surname (now the accepted version in revivals of Oliver! including the 2009 Drury Lane revival) is utilized throughout this chapter and its successors.
Life,” “I’d Do Anything,” and “Be Back Soon” all highlight the camaraderie of the thieves’ den. This latter group of numbers is particularly important to the structure of the show, not only because Bart’s celebration of the thieves’ den is one of the most innovative elements of his adaptation, but because these numbers fit directly into the music-hall tradition that Bart was so fond of utilizing.

The centrality of music and song to the narrative of Oliver! distinguishes it from its musical predecessors; Novello and Coward used music predominantly to embellish their operetta-style shows rather than to help tell the story, and The Boy Friend and Salad Days, both of which feature lighthearted and purposefully nostalgic songs, utilize music primarily for the purpose of entertainment. Bart’s score, with its music-hall roots, is also nostalgic and entertaining, but it is simultaneously much more modern and American in its use of songs to supplement the flow of the narrative and to define the characters. Incorporating serious songs like “As Long As He Needs Me,” which is a frank and fundamentally modern depiction of a woman in an abusive relationship, allows Bart to experiment with the dramatic possibilities of music, much as American writers of musicals had done in shows like Carousel and West Side Story. Despite the fact that many of Bart’s songs looked backward toward the traditions of the music hall, Bart was simultaneously looking forward toward a new phase in the era of the West End musical—an era in which writers allowed songs to tell stories. Given the importance of the music and lyrics to the story being presented in Oliver!, the musical is clearly structured according to the American tradition of the book show, which goes back all the way to Oklahoma! One might even interpret Bart’s use of the exclamation point at the end of his show’s title as an allusion to this predecessor—it is indeed somehow fitting that the two most important modern musicals produced in America and Britain in the
twentieth century featured titles that included an exclamation point, given the tremendous influence that they would exert on the tenets of musical theater in their respective countries. Several English theater critics asserted that Oliver! was the most important musical to reach the West End since Oklahoma! Thus, the parallel becomes even clearer: Oliver Twist: The Musical, or just plain Oliver would not have placed the piece in the same context.

The true significance of Oliver!’s transatlantic elements, however, is that Bart was able to so effectively preserve the Englishness of his source. The instrument that granted Bart this opportunity was the show’s score, for although the writer incorporated the songs to Oliver! according to the tenets of many of the American shows that had dominated the West End in the years leading up to its production, the style and tenor of many of the show’s most memorable numbers were perceptibly British—specifically, Bart composed songs that, like his earlier numbers for Fings, reflected the traditions of the music halls. Whereas Fings relied on a revue-show structure, however, Bart was able to preserve the conventions of music-hall entertainment while simultaneously writing songs that were fully integrated into the Dickensian story.

The music halls that Lionel Bart attended in post-World War II London were very different from the smoky, “debauched” Victorian music halls that dominate our collective vision of what exactly defines music-hall culture. Even so, Bart’s working-class background directly connected him with the traditions of the music hall, which had emerged as a primarily working-class form of entertainment in the previous century; from early on in its existence, the music hall was perceived “as an element of working-class culture” (Kift 2). Dagmar Kift writes that “it was not until the 1890s that music halls began to appeal to society as a whole. Before then audiences were almost exclusively recruited from working-class

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12 Bart used the same titling technique for several of his other musicals including Blitz! and the ill-fated Twang!!
neighborhoods” (175). Music-hall entertainment eventually evolved from a primarily working-class form of amusement into a more widely accepted revue-style show. G.J. Mellor claims that the genre peaked in 1912 when King George V specifically requested a performance from a popular troupe of music hall performers at the Palace Theatre in London (117). Unfortunately, the genre would fall into decline shortly thereafter. Christopher Pulling chronicles this decline with a nostalgic sense of regret in his retrospective text, They Were Singing and What They Sang About, and ultimately links the fall of the music hall with a significant decline in the overall musicality of English culture: “Gone are the days when (as Sir Max Beerbohm had recalled), we boldly warbled in drawing-rooms after dinner, with accompaniment on the pianoforte. Largely gone, too, are the days when we instinctively hummed or whistled or even warbled in our baths some new or old piece of music. Sophistication has set in, undermining self-confidence, and we modestly ‘listen in’ to professionals, our betters” (15). Whereas music hall had initially revolved around ordinary working-class people singing together in a spirit of camaraderie, the modern state of music was one of passive auditory processing as opposed to active vocal participation.

None of this is to say that music was completely divorced from working-class culture by the time that Lionel Bart came along. London was still a highly musical city even as the performance dynamics in working-class circles shifted. Years after writing Oliver!, the composer would nostalgically recall that the musicality inherent in his working-class upbringing proved essential to the composition of the score. Although Bart composed songs in his head, the inspiration for such tunes was to be found all around him, particularly in music halls. Mellor notes that the post World War II era “brought about a revival of interest in the music halls” (138) even as many of the older halls were shutting down.
*Fings* is a musical that is steeped in the tradition of the music hall, not only through its focus on Cockneys, but simultaneously, through its presentation of the musical numbers. This particular musical is clearly *Oliver!’s* chief forebear, for the Cockney language and music-hall melodies with which Bart experimented while writing the score would both reemerge in *Oliver!* Furthermore, the loveably roguish characters who sing Bart’s songs in *Fings* are similar in many respects to the motley crew that makes up the cast of characters in *Oliver!* Though *Oliver!’s* links to music-hall culture are not as overt as those of its predecessor given that the score is set up like an integrated show as opposed to a revue, nearly all of the best loved songs from *Oliver!* contain elements that reflect the traditions of the music hall.

The original text proves an excellent source for inspiring such a depiction given the fact that *Oliver Twist* is arguably the most “low-class” of all of Boz’s novels—that is, the focus on the thieves’ den and the workhouse means that the characters presented in this particular novel are from the lowest rungs of the social ladder. Hence, having characters like Nancy, Fagin, and the Artful Dodger express themselves through music-hall style songs seems perfectly natural; though the more formalized Victorian music hall did not actually exist at the time of Dickens’s writing *Oliver Twist*, the early roots of the institution had started to take shape, and characters like Nancy, Fagin, the Dodger, Bates, and Bet, all of whom spend time at the Three Cripples saloon, would have been part of this early music-hall scene which revolved more around tavern songs and drinking than formal stage entertainment. Bart taps into these music-hall traditions through the form and content of many of the songs in *Oliver!*

“Oom-pah-pah” is the most obvious illustration of the influence of the music hall on the score to *Oliver!*, but there are countless examples that show a similar influence. Several key
numbers feature lower-class characters parodying the manners of upper-class people: “It’s a Fine Life” and “I’d Do Anything” both fall into this category as the Dodger, Nancy, Bet, and the rest of Fagin’s gang all mock the pretensions of the upper orders. This is in keeping with the traditions of the “toff” songs of the music hall, for in these kinds of numbers, male music-hall performers would parody dandies and fops while female singers would mock the traditional roles of women. Pulling details the tenor of such songs in his study, citing Rickaby’s “Silk Hat Tony”:

You can tell by my manner and style  
I’m a swell, yes, a swell all the while  
It’s one life of pleasure, I stroll at my leisure  
My stride to an inch is correct Bond Street measure.  
I walk up and down Piccadilly  
From sunrise to close of the day.  
I’ve strolled the same beat till I’ve worn out my feet,  
And my ankles have senile decay

I’m Silk Hat Tony, I’m down and I’m stoney,  
I’m not only broke, but I’m bent  
The fringe round my trousers keeps lashing the houses,  
But, dammit, I’m gay and content.  
I stroll the west gaily, you’ll see me there daily,  
From Burlington Arcade up to the Old Bailey. (Pulling’s emphases, 36)

The Dodger, who proudly introduces himself as a “gent” to Oliver, likewise enjoys mocking middle-class pretensions, most especially in “I’d Do Anything,” during which he shares a mock romance with Nancy, who assumes the airs of a genteel lady. Nevertheless, the lyrics to “I’d Do Anything” are not written in the sardonic tone of the “Silk Hat Tony” song; rather, it is an affectionate little love song. This does not mean that it has no basis in the music hall, however—even music-hall songs, best remembered as being bawdy, had their sentimental side. Pulling notes that these “songs from the heart” (123), were taken very seriously by audiences: “The performer’s success might be gauged by the number of handkerchiefs
produced” (123). Thus, even the sentimental songs in Oliver! are not incongruous with the score’s music-hall roots.

Fagin’s two main numbers, “Pick a Pocket or Two,” and “Reviewing the Situation,” can also be traced back to the music hall in terms of the patter style employed in the two songs. Deborah Vlock describes the patter song as “a type of comic song typical of music-hall entertainment. It consists of sung portions interspersed with spoken dialogue. The spoken dialogue, or patter, is generally wordy and unwieldy, with lapses in grammar and logic that make it somewhat difficult to follow” (125). “Pick a Pocket or Two,” with its highly alliterative refrain, is evocative of the patter song, and “Reviewing the Situation” is an even more obvious example, for although not much of the song is actually “spoken,” there are parts of the number that are more “talked through” than sung. There is also the same sort of wordiness and unwieldiness described by Vlock as Fagin repeatedly tries to outline a course of action, and then, second guesses himself.

Various elements in several other numbers in the score can be linked to the conventions of the halls, such as the humorous interactions between Mr. Bumble and Mrs. Corney in “I Shall Scream,” which presents the traditionally comedic and cynical portrayal of romance on the music-hall stage, or the Cockney witticisms presented in the Dodger’s “Consider Yourself.” The joint effect of the Cockney idiom used by various characters when singing and the music-hall tenor of many of the songs that Bart wrote for the show is to accentuate the Englishness of the musical. This effect is inestimably important to the success of the show as a Dickensian adaptation. While one could describe the songs in the musical as being fully integrated because they help to tell the story and define the characters, this integration extends even further in that the genre of music which Bart utilizes most frequently in the
score to *Oliver!* is, like the subject matter, fundamentally British. Consequently, although Bart is clearly operating within the American structure of the book show, he is also creating a truly British musical through his use of music-hall conventions. Coupled with its working-class roots, nobody can deny the fundamental Englishness of music-hall entertainment; Pulling notes that “the old music-hall songs were a national product” (20). Even though the music hall was viewed as a low-class form of entertainment, its popularity reveals much about working class tastes and trends in Britain in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and such attitudes are infinitely suited to the style, story, and idiom of the quintessentially British musical, *Oliver!* Bart’s working-class roots and fondness for music-hall style entertainment thus served him well in preserving the Englishness that was so central to the creative vision behind *Oliver!* Just as the Cockney elements of *Fings* necessitated Bart’s creating a distinctly English musical score through music-hall style songs and lyrics inspired by street slang, the Dickensian element of *Oliver!* necessitated an equally British approach to the adaptation’s score. Simultaneously, the Dickensian part of the show supplemented the concept of *Oliver!* as a British musical in a way that perhaps no other literary source could have.

Although Bart succeeded in merging elements from two different cultural and musical traditions, it is likewise important to note that, as a result of many of the innovative touches that Bart brought to the musical based on this multifaceted approach, the final product defied any clear-cut categorization. Though the show could be labeled a British musical due to its English subject matter and Bart’s own Englishness, it was an entirely new kind of English musical. Even the British theater critics who touted its Englishness and viewed it as a British response to the American musical tradition were quick to assert that *Oliver!* was a new entity.
Here it is useful to return to Lloyd Webber’s description of Lionel Bart as the father of the modern British musical. As mentioned, the most obvious connection between Bart and Lloyd Webber lies in the transatlantic success they managed to achieve. When *Oliver!* reached New York in 1963, it enjoyed the longest run ever attained by a British musical up to that point in history. Lloyd Webber’s *Cats* would eventually break this record, and, as Morley notes, Lloyd Webber essentially proved himself to be Bart’s successor as an English composer capable of exploring the potential of West End musicals to attain success both in London and on Broadway (Spread 154). Both men likewise exerted a groundbreaking effect on the very foundations of British musical theater.

There are several important connections between the technique that Bart employed in *Oliver!* and the format of Lloyd Webber’s “mega-musicals” which serve to reinforce the centrality of Bart to the emergence of the modern British musical. Music is an unwavering constant in *Oliver!* Indeed, the first act is so packed with songs that there are moments when *Oliver!* seems more like a variation on the operetta as opposed to a book show. Music and song are the driving forces behind the show, and the ratio of sung words to spoken words is heavily balanced in favor of the former. The first ten to fifteen minutes of *Oliver!* contain almost no spoken dialogue, as Bart uses songs and music to launch the story: the musical begins with “Food, Glorious Food” to establish the workhouse setting, transitions to the introduction of Mr. Bumble through instrumental underscoring, features an ironically sung prayer on the part of the hypocritical beadle, utilizes more instrumental music to accentuate the rapidity with which the boys devour their gruel, and then shifts almost immediately to another song, “Oliver!”, which is sung by Bumble, Mrs. Corney, and the workhouse orphans. Throughout this entire scene, there are only three spoken lines. The pattern continues for
almost the entire musical, and by the time Oliver reaches Fagin’s den, the gaps between songs are virtually nonexistent: “It’s A Fine Life” leads right into “I’d Do Anything” which leads right into “Be Back Soon.” Even when songs are not being sung onstage, there is still a good deal of music and underscoring; several scenes, including Oliver’s flight to London, his arrest following the picking of Mr. Brownlow’s pocket, and the climactic death of Sikes, feature long periods of instrumental music which not only heighten the intensity of what is taking place on stage, but which simultaneously help to tell the story. The orchestra does an effective job of conveying Oliver’s terrors, the tenacity of his pursuers, and the fierceness of Sikes.

One of the reasons that there is so much music in Oliver! relates back to the Kenny set; since the set changes were arranged to take place in front of the audience, it was necessary for Bart to write more music so as to fill in the breaks between the scenes. Nevertheless, music is central to the basis of the narrative as conceived by Bart. When the composer first began work on the Twist project, it was little more than a series of songs inspired by a classic story, and the songs remained the central element of the piece throughout its development and up through its premiere. Though Bart had made the transition from pop artist to musical theater composer, his fundamental strengths related to his songwriting abilities, and the songs in Oliver! dictate both the narrative pace and thematic significance of the story.

While most book musicals can be broken down into scenes and songs, Oliver! is structured more like a series of musical sequences which include little dialogue, a great deal of singing, and an almost constant underscoring by the orchestra. By utilizing music-hall songs and a Dickensian source within the confines of the conventions set up by a book show, Bart succeeded in creating a British variation on an American art form. As such, Oliver! proved
an especially unique musical which not only combined the integrated technique of American musical theater with British tunes and topics, but which simultaneously united the traditions of operetta, music hall, and pop music.

One American reviewer, Henry Hewes, felt as if a new sort of label was necessary for *Oliver!*, a show which seemed to unite so many different facets of musical theater from both sides of the Atlantic: “the scenes and songs that ensue seem less concerned with these ironies than they are with manufacturing reasonably entertaining vocal numbers which the familiar Dickens characters might sing if they spoke in the vernacular of today’s popular songs. Indeed, for want of a better word, one might call ‘Oliver’ a *poperetta*” (Hewes’s emphases, 26). Hewes, like many American reviewers, was critical of the omission of Dickens’s social commentary in *Oliver!*, but he was likewise willing to acknowledge that Bart had created something which defied categorization: it was neither a traditional operetta nor a straightforward book musical. These innovations would later prove essential to the dominant trends in British musical theater as established by Lloyd Webber when he rose to prominence in the early 1980s.

Like Bart, Lloyd Webber utilized a wide variety of musical styles, genres, and forms in the plays that made him famous. Just as *Oliver!* allowed Bart to experiment with music-hall songs, Jewish folk melodies, pop ballads, and show-tunes, *Cats* granted Lloyd Webber the chance to try out a wide spectrum of genres, such as rock and roll, jazz, opera, and of course, pop music, in the context of a musical narrative. Furthermore, like Bart, Lloyd Webber took a minimalist approach to the libretto, sometimes going so far as to eliminate dialogue entirely—*Cats* is sung-through, and many of the other mega-musicals produced in the 1980s and 90s contain little or no dialogue. Thus, like Lionel Bart, Andrew Lloyd Webber worked
in a British musical format that featured an almost constant stream of songs, utilized different styles of music reflective of different traditions, and, nevertheless, retained the basic principles of American musical theater.

Just as Hewes coined the term “poperetta” to describe Bart’s approach to Oliver!, the word has been cited extensively by critics regarding Lloyd Webber’s work given his use of popular music and his habit of writing musicals with very little dialogue. Though Oliver! does not rely completely on music, the libretto is economical in its use of spoken words. As in the case of integrated book shows, however, the songs and underscoring are utilized to help tell the story, and thus, are wholly unified with the narrative. The influence of this trend in the writing of musicals, from Bart through Lloyd Webber, cannot be denied. Consequently, the historical significance of Oliver! becomes even more striking, as Bart was exploring techniques and trends that would become dominant elements in transatlantic musical theater.

Though classifying Oliver! as a mega-musical is somewhat anachronistic given that the term did not come into widespread use until later, Bart’s adaptation helped to move the British musical in the direction of the mega-musical. Creating this kind of a show based on a Dickensian source seems fitting—the scope of Dickens’s novels warrants a grand sort of musical that primarily employs the medium of song to convey the passionate emotions within the text. Simultaneously, Bart managed to preserve the populism and widespread appeal of Dickens by writing in musical genres that were accessible to widely different groups of people. Part of the “mega” in mega-musical relates to the phenomenal popularity attained by many of these shows, and Oliver!’s record-breaking success in England and the United States is yet another element of this adaptation that makes it a forebear to the mega-musical movement.
Oliver!’s influence on the mega-musical movement would extend beyond the advent of Lloyd Webber, particularly given Oliver!’s status as a personal favorite of mega-musical impresario Cameron Mackintosh. Oliver! even helped to serve as the inspiration for one of the most successful mega-musicals ever produced. Mackintosh once related that when composer Alain Boublil went to see a revival of Oliver! produced in 1977, “he said that as he watched the Artful Dodger sing ‘Consider Yourself,’ the character of Gavroche from Les Miz suddenly just jumped into his head” (qtd. in Singer 82). The ability to link Oliver! to the gestation of mega-musicals like Cats and Les Miz, along with Lionel Bart’s direct influence on the likes of Mackintosh and Lloyd Webber, has only served to reinforce the show’s Englishness, which to this day remains its most groundbreaking quality.

No discussion of Oliver! would be complete without acknowledging its transatlantic achievements. Since Oliver!’s success in England was assured from early on, Albery was fully aware that Bart’s musical would eventually reach Broadway. On July 14, 1960, just two weeks into Oliver!’s run, Albery wrote to Merrick about the show’s success: “Everything continues apace with ‘Oliver!’—business and publicity absolutely wonderful, audiences still cheering….The music publisher told me that they sold more copies of the sheet music of ‘Oliver!’ last week than all the other publishers of all the other sheet music put together” (par. 1). At this point, Albery and Merrick had already begun to engage in preliminary negotiations for a Broadway production. Thus, before there were any concrete details regarding Oliver!’s New York debut, the show was surrounded by tremendous hype.

If the excitement over a Broadway production of Oliver! was enticing to many American investors and theatergoers, it was equally enticing to British theater aficionados. It was the first time that a British musical was being met with such fervor from American investors. An
article in the *London Evening News* published a week after the West End premiere noted that along with Merrick, Maurice Evans, Gilbert Miller, Ed Padua, and Peter Brook, all renowned impresarios in their own right, were competing for the right to produce *Oliver!* on Broadway: “When this musical crosses the Atlantic to Broadway the money taken at the New Theatre will seem like peanuts in comparison” (“A battle is on for ‘Oliver!’,” par. 6). It was yet another crow of victory on the part of the English press regarding this new phase in the history of British musical theater.

Albery’s faith in Merrick’s taking on the role of producer was well placed given that Merrick had already achieved a reputation for supervising the American importation of international shows, and an equally prominent reputation for producing successful Broadway musicals. Of course, *Oliver!* did not need much hype to begin with, as the show’s reputation preceded it before it finally made its Broadway debut. Many American tourists who had seen the musical in England were so entranced by the production that they had subsequently written to Albery in hopes of purchasing the soundtrack. Merrick used the publicity surrounding the score to his advantage and had the American cast record a new version of the soundtrack which went on sale before the show opened, thus fueling the excitement over the production. The stage was set for a very successful journey to Broadway, and *Oliver!* had generated more interest amongst American theatergoers and critics than any other British musical up to that point in history.

*Oliver!* had its first tryout in Los Angeles, moved on to San Francisco, and then played in Detroit and Toronto before finally opening in New York on January 6, 1963. According to Howard Kissel, the pre-Broadway tour ensured that the show would be a success, as the gross from the tour “allowed the show to repay its investments well before it reached the
New York critics” (248). At this point in time, theater critics based in New York still commanded a great deal of power regarding the success or failure of Broadway shows. Though most critics would cordially receive this new musical, others were less welcoming, as will be discussed shortly.

There is perhaps no greater indication of Oliver!’s revolutionary nature, nor of its phenomenal popularity, than the fact that it broke records on both sides of the Atlantic. When it arrived on Broadway and premiered at the Imperial in January of 1963, it was only halfway through its West End run. It transferred to the Shubert the following year and thus ran a total of 774 performances, thus making it the longest running British musical in the history of Broadway up to that point. A limited return engagement was set up at the end of the initial Broadway run so as to sell even more tickets. The show also garnered three Tonys in 1963: Bart won for best musical score, Kenny won for best set design, and Donald Pippin won for best conducting.

The response to Oliver! amongst American audiences was clearly positive, though the critical reaction in the United States was less overwhelmingly affirmative than it had been in England—while Oliver! received mostly good reviews, the sense of excitement that had dominated the British reaction to Bart’s show was somewhat muted in America, at least from a critical standpoint. Surprisingly, many American critics seemed disturbed by Bart’s lack of fidelity to the Dickensian source material, a rather ironic situation given that they had far less incentive to be protective of Dickens in comparison to British critics and audiences. The cultural questions that emerge upon comparing the American critical reaction to Oliver! to the British reaction are enticing, though before proceeding, it is useful to place Oliver! in comparison to several American musicals that had recently attained great success.
Perhaps the two most important predecessors to *Oliver!* on Broadway were *My Fair Lady* and *Camelot.* Both shows were written by the Tony award-winning team of Lerner and Loewe, both shows were big Broadway hits that have since entered the canon of great American musicals, and, perhaps most importantly in this context, both shows were based on English sources and focused on English characters played by English actors and actresses. *My Fair Lady* was adapted from George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion* while *Camelot,* though based on a compilation of Arthurian materials, was largely adapted from T.H. White’s novel *The Once and Future King.* It seems so tempting to label these plays as “British musicals”—as Sheridan Morley puts it, “if *My Fair Lady,* based on Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion,* designed by Cecil Beaton and starring Rex Harrison and Julie Andrews and Stanley Holloway and Robert Coote, was still not a British musical, what is?” (*Spread* 80). The answer to the question is not a simple one, though writing in a British idiom and using British characters and actors is not the same as writing a British musical. Bart’s Englishness was fundamental to the perception of *Oliver!* as a British musical. Conversely, *My Fair Lady* and *Camelot* have largely been perceived in American terms up to this day.

*My Fair Lady,* Lerner and Loewe’s finest musical, alters Shaw’s original text ever so slightly by teasing a romance between Eliza and Professor Higgins, and, at the very end of the play, implying that such a romance could actually come to fruition. David Walsh and Len Platt astutely assert that although the musical is an adaptation of a British source, it “takes up issues of gender, power and love in an American way” (113), fundamentally, by re-imagining the story as a love story and placing significant emphasis on the idea of Eliza as a “modern Cinderella” (113). Lerner and Loewe’s Eliza is a true lady in her heart from the

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13 One might put *Brigadoon* into this category as well, given its setting and subject matter, along with its status as a Lerner and Loewe musical. However, *Brigadoon* is not based on a British literary source.
very beginning, and she attains a sort of American independence, represented in part by the power she is able to gain over Higgins, that her forebear in the Shaw text is unable to achieve. As Walsh and Platt note, “it is because Eliza becomes the power that she and Higgins can marry. Her transformation allows Higgins to reform by recognizing his need for her…and so establishes a love relationship between them, and not just one of master and servant” (113-114). *My Fair Lady* may have proved a tremendous success in both the United States and England, but it was not a truly British musical, and its transatlantic success went in the usual direction: from New York to London. *Camelot* too seemed a somewhat Americanized version of the British source materials from which Lerner and Loewe were working, particularly in the much lighter first act—when the easily befuddled Pellinore learns of Arthur’s ascent to the throne, his humorous reaction is presented as the equivalent of a worker learning of a coworker’s promotion. Since Arthur was neither born nor raised to be king, he often comes across as an elected official (in spite of his mystical birthright) in that he identifies with the common people of his kingdom and wishes to have their approval. Furthermore, the depiction of most of the other characters in the play seems predominantly American and modern as opposed to British and classical. Our popular understanding of *Camelot* has likewise ingrained the show in American culture given the links between the fictional kingdom in the musical and the Kennedy presidency. For certain there is a difference between writing a musical about a British topic and writing a British musical.

It is inaccurate to state that *Oliver!* was the very first British musical to find true success on Broadway. *The Boy Friend* enjoyed a respectable run, and Anthony Newley and Leslie Bricusse’s *Stop the World—I Want to Get Off*, which had opened in the West End the year after *Oliver!*, was transferred successfully to Broadway under Merrick’s supervision in late
1962 just a few months before *Oliver!* itself would arrive. Nevertheless, the allegorical tone and minimalist staging of *Stop the World* did not convey the same sort of grandeur of *Oliver!* Consequently, *Oliver!* proved a far larger target for traditionalist forces in American theater circles who were not necessarily open to receiving a hit British musical on Broadway. Indeed, the mixed feelings that some critics had about *Oliver!* conveys a certain protectiveness and uncertainty that stands in distinct contrast to the celebratory, patriotic pride that many British theater critics took in the West End debut of *Oliver!* The fact that this uncertainty manifested itself in the response to *Oliver!* as an adaptation of a Dickens novel makes the situation all the more intriguing.

Many American critics who found fault with *Oliver!* when it debuted on Broadway were particularly turned off by the fact that Bart had broken so fundamentally from Dickens’s *Oliver Twist*. *Time Magazine* and *Newsweek* were both especially critical of this facet of the musical, with the critic from *Time* asserting that Bart had “blue-penciled out the socially conscious harshness of Dickens and mauve-penciled in the timeless hokum of showland” (52). The reviewer claims that the first sight of the workhouse orphans is misleading, for the moment they begin “Food Glorious Food,” “the audience knows that nothing painful, nothing honest, nothing real will be inflicted upon it. In Oliver twisted, the Thieves’ Kitchen becomes an urban Sherwood Forest, with Robin Hood Fagin teaching his pickpockets to rob from the rich and give to the deserving poor—theirselves. The grim workhouses, stews and drinking dens of London become playgrounds for boys with a taste for adventure” (52). The *Newsweek* critic is equally hostile toward the literary elements of *Twist* as they are reinvented in *Oliver!*, claiming that all Bart’s adaptation offers is “a hurry-up plot synopsis….In place of the sinister old professor of pickpocketry who at the novel’s end is dragged shrieking to the
gallows, Bart’s Fagin is a naughty old Santa Claus who slinks off, at the last curtain, vowing to turn over a new leaf” (65). Various magazine and newspaper critics followed this same trend of criticizing the adaptation for its divergence from the Dickensian source. John McCarten of the New Yorker claims that the musical “contains none of the pathos and the sad regard for humanity that the Master introduced into his novel. Instead, it seems bent on demonstrating that hunger, poverty, and oppression can be fun” (60). Howard Taubman of the New York Times echoes this sentiment and states that “there is a deep chasm between the musical, ‘Oliver,’ and Charles Dicken’s [sic] ‘Oliver Twist’” (5). Perhaps the most remarkable element of these criticisms of Bart’s musical is that the American critics’ adamancy about preserving the integrity of Dickens’s text stands in complete opposition to the British critics’ willingness to accept the unfaithfulness of Bart’s adaptation to its source; why should American writers, who have no direct investment in Dickens’s literary legacy, be so picky, and British writers, who have a direct investment in Dickens, be so laissez-faire?

Even though Oliver Twist had already made the transition from British novel to culture text at this point, Dickens was still regarded as a British novelist and the cultural perceptions of Oliver Twist had been reclaimed by the British through David Lean’s film adaptation. What then should account for the American critical response regarding the fidelity issue? The

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14 If American critics diverged in their overall appreciation of Oliver!, one point of unanimity was the praise for the show’s set. Virtually every single critic, even those who disliked the musical, had nothing but the highest esteem for Kenny’s scenery. Jones found the set to be the most memorable element of the show: “Almost anything might happen on it. A truck would swing, a staircase turn slowly into London Bridge, part of a thieves’ kitchen melt imperceptibly into a prosperous bedroom. At any moment, one felt ships might sink, Vesuvius erupt, Queen Victoria get crowned, an early railway train race across the stage: Mr. Kenny would have found place for the lot” (11). The Newsweek critic, though dismissive of the show as a whole, expressed similar sentiments: “Whenever the show’s bogus physical vitality gives way to moments of legitimately striking theatre, the thanks are visually due to Sean Kenny’s miraculous all-purpose setting” (65). Given the meticulous work that went into creating a production of Oliver! for an American tour, such praise was well warranted: “All the mechanised scenery for the American tour of ‘Oliver!’... had to be altered to suit the American system of 210/20 volts and 60 cycles, as against our own 230 volts and 50 cycles” (Gordon Smith par. 18).
answer most likely relates to the divergences in American and British theatrical trends in the 1950s and 60s.

From a cultural standpoint, Oliver! had tapped into a longstanding movement in the British theater from conservative, mainstream entertainment to more experimental and daring theatrical projects, though Oliver! was able to attain the Albery-esque balance of achieving financial and popular success while simultaneously creating something new in the West End. American theater critics would have had less regard for the revolutionary nature of Oliver! given the fact that the traditions and conventions against which Oliver! was rebelling were essentially British. Hence, an American appreciation of Oliver! that fully mirrored the appreciation that many British critics felt upon watching such a new and innovative musical would have been difficult to generate. As mentioned, the hope that Oliver! presented for many English critics and theatergoers regarding the possibilities for the British musical in the second half of the twentieth century seemed to negate any sort of criticism relating to the musical’s lack of fidelity toward its source. It was less easy for the American critics to ignore this discrepancy, for the stakes regarding the first Broadway production of Oliver! were far lower from an American point of view.

The fidelity criticism offered by many American critics during the initial Broadway run of Oliver! may also have been a diplomatic means through which to express frustration with all of the hype surrounding a British musical that would go on to attain unparalleled success in the United States. Writing for Theatre Arts, Alan Pryce-Jones states that “it would be very easy to dismiss Oliver! as an impertinence. It has very little to do with Dickens” (10). Labeling the show as “impertinent” presents an interesting choice of words on the part of the critic, and while his next sentence seems to imply that he is using this term to describe Bart’s
lack of fidelity to Dickens, the “impertinence” of an English musical coming to Broadway amidst such publicity when America had long ago cornered the market on the musical genre might very well have been a factor in the critic’s negative assessment. Tellingly, those American critics who embraced Oliver! largely chose to ignore the fidelity issue; furthermore, many of these positive reviews express a sense of appreciation for the new strides that the British were making in the genre of musical theater. The contrast between the negative, fidelity-based reviews, which seem openly hostile to Oliver! as both a Dickensian adaptation, and, more subtly, as a British musical, and the positive, “hospitable” reviews offered by other critics is striking. Just as many traditionalist American critics would later meet the mega-musicals of the 1980s and 90s with harsh condemnation that was partially attributable to their loyalty to the American roots of musical theater, Oliver! was subjected to similar censure. The patriotic and nationalistic response of many English theater critics to Oliver! thus found its doppelganger in the response of those American critics who did not want to see a British musical attain such prominence on Broadway. An article printed in the London Times in June of 1963 noted that American critics were growing wary of the “British encirclement of Broadway” (15), a reaction matched by several Broadway artists. A revue show produced at the Plaza that same year featured a chorus sardonically singing about the desire to see Oliver! close and return home to the United Kingdom.

The more general response amongst American reviewers was largely positive, and the reviews of these hospitable critics mirrored the writings of the West End critics in many ways. One such critic was John McClain of the New York Journal American who unhesitatingly labeled Oliver! “a breakthrough for the British in a field which has so long been dominated by Americans” (397). Like his English counterparts, McClain realized that
he was witnessing something new, and moreover, something that was definitively English. In contrast to several of his fellow American reviewers, however, McClain shared the British desire to celebrate these innovations rather than condemn them. Norman Nadel of the *New York World-Telegram and The Sun* similarly asserted that, “for sheer audacity, you can’t beat the mere idea of making Dickens’s classic of English literature into a musical. But such a man is Lionel Bart….If this indicates an irreverence for the classic, it also indicates just the bold ingenuity which musical theatre needs” (398). Nadel’s focus on the “bold ingenuity” behind *Oliver!* is a celebration of the experimentalism of modern British theater which allowed for the gestation of the musical. Like the British critics who happily received *Oliver!*, the American critics who offered praise to this new musical circumvented questions regarding the faithfulness of the adaptation to its source and instead chose to focus on the innovative elements of the show. Conversely, those American critics who wrote negative reviews of *Oliver!* focused on a conservative issue: fidelity to the source. This conservatism seems a clear indication of yet another kind of conservatism on the part of these critics, one relating to the desire to preserve the traditions of American musical theater. Focusing on the fidelity issues allowed for the expression of reservations regarding the liberties taken with Dickens, and simultaneously, the liberties taken by the British in trying to reverse the transatlantic flow of musicals.

Contrasting the American and British responses to *Oliver!* reveals several interesting trends and cultural issues, but one of the factors complicating any such comparison is that New York audiences did not experience the exact same show as London audiences. Thus, assessing the English response to the Broadway production of *Oliver!* is useful for providing further insights regarding the adaptation’s transatlantic shifts. In the aforementioned article
printed in the *London Times* that June, the paper’s New York drama critic reported on the “British invasion” of Broadway. Reflecting on the cultural differences between *Oliver!* in the West End and *Oliver!* on Broadway, the critic noted that, “in London, one could connect *Oliver!* with the more serious new plays; it was possible to see this musical as one more expression of an anti-social rebellion against the ruling class. The true values of the play were embodied in the outlaws, Fagin and Nancy….Now, in New York, everything is less distinct” (15). The critic’s choice to link *Oliver!* to the “anti-social rebellion” advocated by various straight plays being produced at the time in London seems questionable given that *Oliver!* presents a fairly harmonious social vision in the end. Nevertheless, he is correct to link the show to the other revolutionary plays that were being produced, as *Oliver!* was certainly a product of the movements embodied by Theatre Workshop.

Even more significant is the fact that one of this critic’s primary complaints related to the portrayal of Fagin, as he contrasted Ron Moody’s original depiction with Clive Revill’s version: “The most tangible change is the taming of Fagin….As played by Ron Moody in London, Fagin was livelier, more sinister, and slightly Jewish if mainly Cockney; in New York, Clive Revill’s Fagin is milder and all Cockney” (15). The critic’s assertions about the differences between the actors’ interpretations are difficult to prove or disprove given that neither performance was recorded on video, though Moody would go on to play the role on film a few years later. Nevertheless, comparing the original soundtracks of the West End and Broadway productions of the musical, one can immediately detect significant divergences in the actors’ performances.

Moody’s interpretation of Fagin does not shy away from exploring the character’s Jewish roots; his intonation as he sings contains a decidedly Yiddish inflection pattern. Though not
as overtly ethnic as Alec Guinness’s Fagin in the Lean film, Moody, like Guinness, explicitly presents Fagin’s Jewish side, for the accent he employs shifts back and forth between East Ender and Eastern European. There is a bit of a lisp incorporated into the pronunciation of his s’s, and the vowel sounds he utilizes are Yiddish in their basic tone. In “Pick a Pocket or Two,” the differences between the two performers’ approaches are especially detectable due to the alliterative nature of the lyrics; Moody purposefully utilizes a nasal voice on the last repetition of the main phrase in each of the refrains, making the lyrics sound something like the words to a Jewish folksong.

Bart himself was put off by just how ethnic Moody’s performance became as the actor grew more comfortable in the role, and the composer worried that such a portrayal of the character would offend audience members and potential investors in international productions of the show. There was at least some legitimacy to the composer’s claims, as the contentious elements of Moody’s performance preceded the show’s reputation in New York, though this controversy was somewhat attributable to Bart’s very public outcry against some of Moody’s creative choices. In an article for her “Voice of Broadway” column, notorious American journalist Dorothy Kilgallen dryly opined: “Quite a few Americans won’t understand why Mr. Merrick decided to import an anti-Semitic show in the first place” (15). An annoyed and defensive Bart wrote back to Kilgallen shortly thereafter, asserting that “anybody that can call my show anti-Semitic is either an idiot or a yuchner. (Yuchner is Yiddish for a muck stirrer). All the important Jewish organizations, such as the B’nai Brith in England, California, and in fact anywhere ‘OLIVER!’ has appeared, have had only high praise for my treatment of the story” (par. 1). This spat took place in September of 1962 and Moody had long since left the role of Fagin, though the reputation of his performance had
lingered. Merrick thus wanted to make certain that the show did not offend New York
audiences. The stakes were equally high for Bart and Albery as there might have been even
larger repercussions regarding the film version of Oliver! they hoped to produce—a
successful film release would require a receptive global market.

Despite Bart’s frequent complaints, Moody noted in a later interview that his stage
performance did not generate much controversy in Britain. Whether this is reflective of the
fact that British audiences were able to place his Fagin in a cultural/literary tradition that
made it more acceptable, or the fact that indelicate portrayals of Jews were more widely
tolerated in England than in other countries given the history of such characters on the
English stage, is debatable. For certain, Moody’s depiction can be put into a wider context of
stage adaptations of Oliver Twist in which the Jewish elements of the character were
emphasized, but it could be placed in an even larger framework of English plays like The
Merchant of Venice or The Jew of Malta. Clearly, Moody was performing Fagin in a country
that was no stranger to such versions of this character (or a variety of similar characters).

Revill’s Fagin is a less traditional, more PC version of the character. The accent he uses is
purely Cockney, and there is no Yiddish intonation in his singing. The overall tone of voice
he uses is less sly, and there is a lighter, more comic feel to the old man. However, the one
significant problem regarding Revill’s more gentle portrayal of the character is that much of
Fagin’s music, as written by Bart, is clearly Jewish in its rhythm and tenor. The use of the
tambourine in the background of “Pick a Pocket or Two” gives the piece an Eastern
European flavor, and consequently Moody’s Yiddish intonation seems very fitting. Even
more significant is the use of the fiddle and clarinet throughout “Reviewing the Situation,” as
these instruments are evocative of the same Jewish musical traditions—there are moments
where the orchestration to this number seems as though it might be inserted into *Fiddler on the Roof*. Again, Moody’s vocal patterns and accent seem extremely appropriate against this background. John Simon, an American reviewer, noticed the discrepancy between Bart’s music and Revill’s performance: “Incidentally, one of the best numbers in the London production, Fagin’s ‘You’ve Got to Pick a Pocket or Two,’ [sic] which is meant to become gradually a hora and a pseudo-Israeli folk song, is here carefully de-Semitized, like the character of Fagin, into a mere Cockney” (83). Like the London reviewer, Simon was disappointed that sensitivity took precedent over genuineness.

The “de-Semitization” of Fagin for the Broadway production is not surprising. In *Making Americans*, Andrea Most notes that the theater was of vital importance to many New York Jews in terms of their ability to assimilate: “Since for Jews ‘otherness’ was not part of their external identity, as it was for African- and Asian-Americans, they could convincingly adopt alternate personas, playing the role of ‘American’… and passing as nonmarginal subjects. Theatre was, for Jews, both a metaphor for the presentation of self in everyday life and a cultural form in which they participated in large numbers” (13). Thus, the importance of Broadway to a great many Jews, as both an institution and a way of life, is understandable:

While many children of Jewish immigrants went to college, learned professions, and moved into the middle and upper classes, they often found non-Jewish social circles difficult to penetrate. During the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, Ivy League universities, as well as medical and law schools, established quotas for admitting Jews. Corporations, law firms, and hospitals quietly but firmly limited or prevented Jews from entering their halls. Country clubs, business clubs, and neighborhoods maintained restricted covenants in order to preserve homogeneity. (Most 26)

Broadway offered opportunities for Jews to transcend the social restrictions placed on them by society, not only through the playing of parts, but likewise through the attainment of fame and popularity which allowed for greater power in trying to overcome such barriers. Many
of the great writers of the golden age of the musical, including Rodgers, Hammerstein, Hart, Kern, Berlin, the Gershwins, Lerner, Loewe, Styne, and Sondheim, were Jewish.

Most does not comment on Oliver! in her text, though she does make a brief reference to the shift in power between Britain and America regarding musical theater trends in the latter part of the century, noting that while Sondheim preserved the American traditions of the musical, “Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice introduced the wildly popular rock-opera to the Broadway stage—and marked the end of American Jewish dominance of the musical form” (196). If Americans are protective of the Broadway musical as an institution, Jewish Americans are particularly protective. Undoubtedly, a British musical that featured an indelicate portrayal of a Jewish character based on an anti-Semitic character from a nineteenth-century British novel would have been highly problematic. The reasons for Revill’s sanitized portrayal thus become clear.15

Conductor Donald Pippin addresses this subject in one of the bonus interview tracks on the reissued Oliver! Broadway soundtrack, and notes that Merrick, like Bart, had been worried about what the response would be if Moody were to reprise the role he had made famous. Merrick, a Jew himself, felt that New York audiences, which were made up of a great many Jewish theatergoers, would have rejected Moody’s interpretation as anti-Semitic:

Again it was Merrick, he felt it was too ethnic; it was going to be offensive in this country. We hadn’t arrived—in ’62—we were not at the point of accepting ethnic things the way we do today. We have made tremendous growth in those....And he was afraid it just would be objectionable. So he asked Clive Revill...to find a way to not do Fagin the way Ron Moody had done it in London....I really preferred Clive’s performance....I found him not to be so overbearing. I found he had much more charm. I found he didn’t put you off as much as the other approach, which might be more authentic in terms of history.

15 This despite the fact that both Moody and Bart fit in with the American tradition of Jews who gravitated toward the performing arts. Bart himself once stated: “I feel that all life is a search for love...a desire to be loved. And nobody is more guilty of this vice...than minority groups like Jews. That is why they make such brilliant entertainers. That is why they go into showbusiness” (qtd. in Roper 8).
Here, Pippin reinforces one of the chief disparities between the contexts of the performances, as Moody was working from a longer theatrical tradition in which characters like his Fagin had been accepted for centuries. Though Moody’s performance remains the definitive depiction for many followers of the show, Revill’s more PC take has inspired several subsequent performances; Jonathan Pryce, who would play the part in the West End decades later, followed Revill’s lead in playing up the character’s Cockney traits. Whether a major production of the show will ever return Fagin to his Jewish roots is yet to be seen.

In spite of the variances between the American and British reactions to *Oliver!*, there was no denying that the triumph of *Oliver!* marked a critical moment in the evolution of the British musical. Furthermore, the culture text of *Oliver Twist* was forever impacted by the premiere of *Oliver!*—popular perceptions of Dickens’s story would now be shaped by Bart’s musical. The basis for this popularity will be discussed in the next chapter which presents a reading of the musical and further analysis of the negotiations that take place within the adaptation.
Chapter 3
“Oliver! Oliver!” – A Reading of the Musical

When Oliver! debuted in 1960, it marked a turning point in the history of British musical theater, and simultaneously, in our cultural understanding of Oliver Twist. In truth, the culture text of Twist would never be the same again, for the popularity of Lionel Bart’s vision of the Dickensian characters, along with the unquestionable catchiness of his songs, meant that, for many people, the popular understanding of Twist connected directly back to the sights, sounds, and spectacle of Bart’s show. Despite protests from traditionalists who disliked the creative liberties taken with Dickens’s story, there are many elements in Oliver! that have their foundation in the original novel. Other elements are heavily modified to the point where they are almost unrecognizable. Nevertheless, the themes of the two works as described by the two writers remain comparable: Dickens’s text is about the survival of good in the face of evil, while Bart’s adaptation is about humanity’s enduring desire for love. Though the tone and technique behind the two creations vary widely, the basic themes of the works remain similar.

Bart would repeatedly claim in the years following the premiere of Oliver! that the theme of “where is love?” as epitomized by the song of the same name, was the driving force behind his writing the musical. In a 1960 letter to Ron Moody, the composer firmly asserted as much, listing what he viewed to be the four central threads of the plot:

As I originally saw it, ‘OLIVER!’ falls into four basic plots in this order of importance:

1) The story of a little boy searching for love against all opposition.
2) The story of a strange and seemingly fruitless romance between ‘Nancy’ and ‘Bill.’

3) The story of a lonely Jew who is searching for love, and finds it from the children he fosters.

4) The comic and slightly macabre relationship between ‘Mr. Bumble’ and ‘Widow Corney.’ (par. 4)

Here then are four very different love stories woven together into a single narrative. Furthermore, each story revolves around a different type of love.

The first type is a pure and unadulterated love for an ideal, as Oliver, having been brought up in an environment where love is beaten down to the point of extinction, focuses all the tenderness of his generous young heart toward the hope that he will someday find someone who will reciprocate these feelings. The highly episodic structure of the plot allows Oliver to encounter a wide variety of people, some of whom try to live up to this ideal, though whether Oliver ever truly attains what it is that he has been searching for is complicated by some of the contrasts between the environments in which he is placed.

The second type of love is a darker and more troubling emotion involving a woman trapped in an abusive relationship that she is unable to escape because of her unwavering devotion to the man who has mistreated her. Consequently, it is easy to pity Nancy and despise Bill, yet the housebreaker too is deserving of the slightest shred of sympathy, for his behavior is understandable. Whereas Oliver transcends the moral and physical squalor of the workhouse, Bill and Nancy are both products of their environment. It is Nancy’s love for Oliver which eventually allows her to achieve his level of transcendence over this environment, though doing so also seals her fate, as the brutal Bill, who despises Oliver and the goodness that he represents, is wholly incapable of attaining this transcendence—much as he is incapable of reciprocating Nancy’s love for him.
The third “love story” as envisioned by Bart is perhaps the most complicated of the quartet. The paternal playfulness associated with Bart’s vision of Fagin, a trait which distinctly separates him from his literary forebear, belies the more serious elements of the character, most of which relate to his own isolation and inability to turn his back on a lifestyle that is getting increasingly difficult for him to enjoy. In the novel, Fagin’s relationship with his comrades in the underworld is purely exploitative: he uses them to steal for him, and when they have outlived their usefulness or become a danger to him, he unhesitatingly sends them to the gallows. His relationship with the boys in his gang, while similarly exploitative, is more personal, and in spite of his wickedness, he still serves as the only kind of caretaker that the boys have ever known.

Bart’s version of Fagin is leagues removed from the literary/theatrical tradition of the wicked Jew in which Dickens was writing, however. In the musical, Fagin is an isolated old man who has tried to create a family and a living for himself in the face of the odds posed by a harsh and brutal society—the same society that has mistreated Oliver since the day he was born. His affection toward his charges is genuine and, even at his worst moments, he remains sympathetic. The Artful Dodger is just as sympathetic, and the symbiotic relationship between the two characters as it is presented in the original novel is taken further by Bart and transformed into a dysfunctional familial affection. Complicating this sympathetic portrayal is the fact that Fagin is a criminal, and the question of whether or not his good qualities are enough to excuse his lifestyle is one of the central quandaries posed by the musical.

The final thread of Bart’s love theme is the most comical, and simultaneously, the least loving, as Mr. Bumble and Mrs. Corney’s relationship is not based on any genuine sense of
affection. If Oliver’s love theme revolves around the search for idyllic love, Nancy’s love theme revolves around the dangers of dependency, and Fagin’s love theme revolves around the complexity of adoptive familial love, then Bumble and Corney’s love theme is centered squarely on the comedic elements of superficial love. Bumble is interested solely in Mrs. Corney’s home and property, while Mrs. Corney is interested solely in a physical relationship with the beadle; it is thus unsurprising that their “love” proves the least enduring. Nevertheless, all four types of love are essential to the story, and the songs help to accentuate the show’s main theme.

Though there are obvious thematic parallels between Oliver! and its source, the means of telling the story of the little boy who asked for more vary widely between the two works, particularly when one considers the role of Dickens’s narrator. The narrator of Oliver Twist is one of Dickens’s most ostentatious storytellers—he not only “tells” the story but he embellishes it as he goes. Throughout the first half of the novel, the narrator goes off on tangents and provides stinging and sarcastic side-commentary. In the oft-cited passage where Oliver is given scraps of food set out for the dog by the Sowerberries, the narrator steps into the scene: “I wish some well-fed philosopher, whose meat and drink turn to gall within him; whose blood is ice, whose heart is iron; could have seen Oliver Twist clutching at the dainty viands that the dog had neglected. I wish he could have witnessed the horrible avidity with which Oliver tore the bits asunder with all the ferocity of famine” (31). While Dickens’s primary purpose in employing such a distracting narrative voice is debatable, it often seems as though the narrator is a means to an end; by providing so much satirical commentary, particularly in the early chapters of the novel, the narrator serves as an effective tool for conveying the ideological positions of the author and hitting home his pleas for
societal reform and compassion toward the poor. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Boz’s case is weakened heavily by the inconsistencies in the novel, and likewise, by the virtual disappearance of the narrator in the latter stages of the story.

Even if these inconsistencies did not exist, however, the effectiveness of the narrator would be open to question. George J. Worth finds the storyteller’s tangents and commentary bothersome and claims that the narrator actually undermines Dickens’s central goals in writing this story by presenting the author’s message for social reform in a grating fashion: “When depicting Oliver’s deprivation and degradation, for instance, he is sometimes not content to let narrative, description, and dialogue do their work but has his narrator engage in laboriously sardonic documentary on what is happening—commentary that tends to jar the reader in ways that vitiate much of what the author is trying to achieve” (41). Dickens’s narrator is never content to “show”—rather, he must “tell” the story in a decidedly flamboyant manner.

Karin Lesnik-Oberstein takes a more positive view of Dickens’s storyteller, claiming that his presence is necessary in a story that revolves around such a passive protagonist. Since Oliver is incapable of standing up for himself, the narrator must take a stand for him. Even in chapters where Oliver is the focal point of the story, he rarely says very much—a sharp contrast to the loquacious third-person narrator. Though the embellishments that Dickens puts forward through the narrator can be somewhat distracting, the narrator’s voice is not only essential to telling the story, but simultaneously, to moving the story forward. Oliver himself does not possess the dynamism necessary to do so on his own.

Whereas Dickens must rely on a narrator to tell the story given the textual medium in which he was working, Bart utilizes music for storytelling purposes. The form of a musical
is traditionally not conducive to the presence of a confident and reflective narrator. In *Fiddler on the Roof* and *Man of La Mancha*, the lead characters of Tevye and Cervantes provide narrative commentary throughout the show, but they remain unaware of what is going to happen to themselves or to any of the other characters; they are first-person limited narrators as opposed to the third-person omniscient narrator utilized by Dickens in *Twist*.

Several musicals by Stephen Sondheim, including *Into the Woods* and *Assassins*, attempt to incorporate third-person narrators who are meant to exist outside the world of the other characters, but humorously, these characters are done away with by the central players who view their presence as meddlesome and intrusive: “The Narrator is a deeply unwanted person in his omniscient complacency” (McMillin 152). In *The Musical as Drama*, Scott McMillin presents an interesting theory for why musicals are so resistant to the presence of narrators: the orchestra itself serves as an omniscient narrator. Because a musical alternates between singing and speaking, and no single character sings all of the songs, the one constant is the orchestra itself.

The orchestra is certainly all-knowing: it knows when to introduce numbers, when to bring them to a close, and so forth. The orchestra can also help advance the plot. Sometimes there is action but no dialogue onstage, and the orchestra’s music helps to convey a feeling of what is transpiring—it is the musical’s equivalent of narrative commentary. Given that *Oliver!* contains such a significant amount of music in terms of both its songs and its underscoring, the role of the orchestra is immeasurably important and does indeed seem a sort of substitute to the presence of Dickens’s narrator. Since the third-person omniscient voice that narrates *Oliver Twist* allows for significant freedom in the adaptation process (more-so than a first-person narrator would), Bart can focus on the musicality of all the characters, rather than
preoccupying himself with an individual character’s narrative voice (see Chapter 7). As such, Bart is able to utilize a wide variety of melodies to represent the different characters, though he constantly returns to the main “Oliver!” theme, a three-note musical phrase that is used in conjunction with the pronunciation of the protagonist’s name, so as to keep the focus on the young hero. The musical “voice” of the orchestra thus allows Bart to create a storyteller who does not distract from the protagonist, but rather, helps to place him at the center of the narrative.

Of course, the orchestra must tell Oliver’s story without relying on verbal commentary or digressions. Rather, the music produced by the orchestra simply carries the narrative forward from beginning to end with few embellishments, and even these “embellishments” are confined to melodies as opposed to satirical tangents. Ultimately, this means that most of Dickens’s social commentary, as conveyed to the reader through the voice of the narrator, is dropped—a fact which did not escape the notice of many American reviewers who criticized Oliver! on the grounds of its infidelity to Dickens’s social vision. Though the orchestra can fill in many of the gaps left by the absence of Dickens’s storyteller, it cannot provide the same level of social critique without the addition of words and lyrics.

Oliver Twist opens with the birth of the title character in the parish workhouse and the subsequent death of his mother. The opening chapter, as written by Dickens, is perhaps most noteworthy for the sardonic tone of the narrator’s voice, but this memorable facet of the original text complicates the creation of any live-action version of the novel. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the playwrights of the Victorian era largely ignored the workhouse section of the story, and though David Lean included the workhouse scenes in his film version, he too had difficulty in figuring out just how to begin his motion picture adaptation. The central
complication relates to the purpose of Dickens’s opening chapter, which is not really to introduce Oliver, a mere “item of mortality” (1) at this point as opposed to a fully embodied character, but rather, to introduce the setting of the workhouse which of course sets up the narrator’s satirical commentary.

Clearly, the birth scene would be a difficult starting point for the adaptation. As mentioned, the role of Dickens’s narrator does not translate well to the stage, and introducing Oliver when he is a baby would not allow for any real characterization of the orphan. The only true musical potential that exists in the novel’s opening scene relates to Agnes, Oliver’s suffering mother who dies just after giving him life.

It is significant that Oliver’s mother expires after kissing her son for the first and last time, for Agnes’s loving gesture seems to help shield his spirit from the corruptive and destructive elements of the environment in which he is nurtured. Carolyn Dever eloquently assesses this idea: “The mother’s kiss operates as a form of baptism for Oliver; even this brief moment of connection with his mother establishes her definitively as the standard of goodness and virtue for the boy” (27). In the largely allegorical world of Oliver’s character, the kiss of the adoring mother has almost magical properties and seems to embody the love for which he is searching; Agnes’s all-encompassing adoration for her infant son seems powerful even as Agnes herself is described as frail.

It is somewhat surprising that Bart did not explore the musical potential of the character of Agnes given the centrality of love to his conception for the show, though beginning the adaptation with a song from Agnes and immediately following up such a number with her death would start the musical off on a rather depressing note. Moreover, since Agnes plays such a minor role in the book—at least in terms of her physical presence—the opening
number of the show would be somewhat wasted; most musicals begin with an “I want…” number that establishes the desires and needs of the hero or heroine, and with Agnes on the verge of death, she is largely beyond any wants and needs, save of course for her hopes for her newborn child.

Rather than begin where the novel begins, Bart jumps into the main story of Oliver Twist himself. Appropriately, he opens his adaptation exactly where Oliver’s adventures truly start: with the boy’s asking for more gruel. This is the perfect starting point for the musical for several reasons, not the least of which is the importance of this particular scene in the culture text of *Oliver Twist*. Even people who have never read a single word from the actual novel recall Oliver’s asking for more, for it is a scene that is etched into our cultural consciousness. Thus, audience members can immediately appreciate what is transpiring onstage.

“Food, Glorious Food” is certainly an “I want…” number, as Oliver and the boys sing of their desire for sustenance, though Oliver’s major solo number, “Where is Love?” fits the “I want…” label even more clearly. In this later song, Oliver explicitly makes it clear what is driving him: the desire for love. The desire for food, as presented in “Food, Glorious Food” is a more immediate requirement as opposed to an overarching yearning. Still, from both a practical and artistic standpoint, it is appropriate for Bart to start out with this choral number as opposed to the private solo. Opening the show with a solo from Oliver would be inappropriate because Oliver has not yet established himself as being any different from his fellow orphans. More specifically, Oliver has not yet committed his “rebellion” by asking for more. Since he has not yet distinguished himself from the other workhouse orphans, it is fitting that he sing a song in unison with the larger group instead of beginning with a more
introspective and personal solo number. As in Dickens’s original text, Oliver is just another orphan until he dares to ask for more; this innocent action on the part of the protagonist illustrates the narrator’s claim that “nature or inheritance had implanted a good sturdy spirit in Oliver’s breast” (5). “Where is Love?” can therefore only be sung following the establishment of Oliver’s individual personality and noble spirit, both of which distinguish him from his fellow orphans. Opening the show with a choral number that simply includes the hero is more logical in the context of his development.

The opening verses to “Food, Glorious Food” are purposefully monotonous. The boys all sing together in a staccato manner and their vocal range is restricted to two or three notes: “Is it worth the waiting for/If we live till eighty-four/all we ever get is/gruel/Every day we say a prayer/will they change the bill of fare/still we get the same old/gruel” (2).¹ The first lyrics in the song are all set to the same note, C, which is repeated seven times in a single bar of music. The second bar uses the same pattern, using C sharp instead of C, and the third bar moves up to D. The first lyric to feature any sort of musical variation is the word “gruel,” which is marked by a shift in the notes from C sharp to A, thus laying especial emphasis on the word, and with good reason given the orphans’ detestation for gruel and its centrality to their misery. The entire sequence is then repeated for the second verse, which ends in the exact same way with the same emphasis on the word “gruel.” The repetition of the same notes over and over again in the opening bars to “Food, Glorious Food” is coupled with a sense of repetition in the movements presented onstage. The prompt book from the original 1960 West End production of Oliver! indicates that the blocking of the number matches the music: slow, methodical, and mechanical at first, but gradually building to a boisterous celebration as the boys move from the opening bars of the song to the main refrain in which

¹ All lyrical quotations are cited from the score published by Lakeview Music in 1960.
they celebrate their visions of “Food, Glorious Food.” The flat style of singing and moving in the opening portion of the song is the perfect lead-in, however, for it not only conveys the boys’ depression at the thought of having to down more bowls of gruel, but it simultaneously highlights the mechanical nature of their environment. In the Dickens novel, the inhabitants of the workhouse are disconsolate automatons expected to submissively perform a task assigned to them by the parish administration. In the musical, the opening verse to “Food, Glorious Food” clearly conveys the perfunctory and emotionless elements of workhouse life, and Oliver’s emotional “rebellion” will serve as a prefatory indication of his “sturdy spirit” and loving heart as will be epitomized in his later solo.

As the boys transition to actually singing about food, the song immediately becomes livelier, as their hopes for someday gorging themselves are all that can keep them going. “Food, Glorious Food” is basically structured like a traditional list song, as the boys continue to catalogue all of the foods that they are interested in eating. Their imaginative recording is essential to their survival, and as the song points out, utilizing their imaginations is one of the few freedoms allowed them: “But there’s/nothing to stop us/from getting a thrill when we/all close our eyes and im/agine” (2-3). Humor is equally necessary to their keeping their spirits up, and the lyrics to the song are very funny, displaying Bart’s trademark playfulness:

Food, glorious food!
Hot sausage and mustard!
While we’re in the mood—

1st Solo Boy
Cold jelly and custard!

Pease pudding and saveloys!

2nd Solo Boy
What next is the question?
Rich gentlemen have it, boys—
In-dye-gestion! (3)

Following the singing of the final word in this verse, Bart includes a loud “wa-wa” on the trombone, and the promptbook notes that each boy should “clutch [his] stomach and mouth on [the] raspberry from [the] trombone” (1) as if he is going to be sick from having eaten too much.

The comedy here is, in many ways, far removed from Dickens—for certain, the workhouse, as it is depicted by the author in his novel, is an environment in which such playfulness, imagination, and comedy are nonexistent. Nevertheless, Dickens injects a great deal of humor into the novel’s workhouse scenes, primarily through the narrator’s sardonic commentary. James R. Kincaid notes that a significant amount of the comedy in Oliver Twist ironically has to do with the subject of death, particularly in the opening chapters which are set in the workhouse. This is particularly evident in the scenes involving the workhouse matron Mrs. Mann, who is arguably the most detestable character in the novel:

The elderly female was a woman of wisdom and experience; she knew what was good for children; and she had a very accurate perception of what was good for herself. So, she appropriated the greater part of the weekly stipend to her own use, and consigned the rising parochial generation to even a shorter allowance than was originally provided for them. Thereby finding in the lowest depth a deeper still; and proving herself a very great experimental philosopher. (4)

The narrator goes on to assert that as a result of Mrs. Mann’s childrearing techniques, a workhouse orphan dies in every eight-and-a-half out of ten cases. While the morbidity of this revelation is repulsive, the narrator’s sarcastic remarks about Mrs. Mann as a utilitarian philosopher are darkly humorous. As Kincaid notes, “some of the bitterest humor in the novel is based exactly on the notion of Malthusian redundancy and time and again we are asked to laugh at the horrible concept that, in the face of the continually demonstrated fact
that life is cheap, any importance placed on a single personality is ludicrous” (51). The tone of the humor here in Dickens’s text is far different from Bart’s more innocently comedic musical. Nevertheless, in the opening number Bart acknowledges the same sort of hypocrisy and self-indulgence that Dickens’s satirizes in his novel. The harsh looking “God is Love” sign ironically posted on the workhouse wall epitomizes the sanctimonious negligence of the likes of Mr. Bumble and Mrs. Corney; like Dickens, Bart undermines the power of these individuals by adding levity to the workhouse scenes. In the musical, the boys’ singing of a catchy and humorous song is their own subtle form of rebellion, and this music must substitute for the narrator’s sardonic commentary in undercutting the horrid administrators.

The question of whether or not the boys are seeking anything more than mere physical sustenance throughout the opening number is an interesting one, though the main desire of the song does indeed seem to be food itself. When they express the desire for “one/moment of/knowing/that/full/up/feeling” (7), it seems fairly clear that they are simply referring to the happy feelings which a full stomach can provide. Nevertheless, the workhouse has clearly failed to provide them with any sort of emotional satisfaction as well. The fact that Oliver is able to sing “Where is Love?” a few scenes later indicates that he is distinct in comparison to his peers, for his needs extend beyond the simple desire for food—he is willing to acknowledge the fact that an empty heart is even worse than an empty stomach. In the novel, the scene in which Oliver makes his now immortal request has been interpreted by many critics as more than just a pathetic appeal for another helping of gruel. Juliet John writes that “to many, it is a symbolic moment, symbolic of rebellion, aspiration, entrepreneurship, democracy, capitalism, the quest for identity, desire, appetite—or all of the aforementioned”
(1). If it is nothing else, Oliver’s request is a plea for compassion, and the same desire is integral to “Where is Love?”

The fluidity of the adaptation’s opening scene is noteworthy as “Food, Glorious Food” immediately transitions to the next major number, “Oliver!” Rather than incorporate dialogue between the numbers, Bart again uses music to tell the story: Mr. Bumble’s introduction, which instantly follows the finale to “Food, Glorious Food,” is presented solely through musical underscoring. Fittingly, the musical score features “Pomposo” as a notation for Bumble’s introduction, thus directing the musicians to perform the musical introduction in a manner befitting the self-important beadle. Bumble intonates a brief and ironic blessing over the boys’ dinners, a blessing analogous to the “long grace…said over the short commons” (12) in Dickens’s novel, as he sings: “For what you are about to receive, may the Lord make you truly thankful” (10). The fact that Bumble puts the blessing in the second person “you” as opposed to the first person “we” places the prayer in an important context, for Bumble is not partaking in the gruel himself—clearly, this fat beadle has been indulging himself on far more substantial viands. It is ironic that Bumble should demand that the boys be grateful for their wretched rations, as he is instructing the boys in humility and self-denial, qualities that he sorely lacks himself.

The boys set to eating “like clockwork figures” (10), which again reinforces the monotony and conformity of the workhouse. Once the boys have finished, the stage is set for Oliver’s big moment, though Bart wisely omits the lot-drawing scene from his adaptation. As argued by Joseph Sawicki, Dickens weakens Oliver’s autonomy slightly by establishing that Oliver did not choose to ask for more of his own volition. By excising the lot-drawing sequence, Bart preserves the idea that the hero has a spirit all his own and instills Oliver with a
pluckiness which is necessary given the musical framework in which the author is working; if Bart’s Oliver were as passive and pallid as Dickens’s version of the character, it would be impossible to accept his using music to express himself. This version of the protagonist has more in common with the American film versions of the character than the traditional British stage versions; like Coogan’s interpretation, discussed in Chapter 1, Bart’s Oliver has a spunk that makes him stand out from the other orphans and that earns him both the sympathy and the admiration of the audience.

After Oliver makes his request, he is subjected to the wrath of Bumble and Corney, both of whom sing the song “Oliver!” which immediately follows. The primary objective of the number, as sung by the two workhouse supervisors, is to make an example of Oliver before the other orphans. This goes back to Dickens’s text, as the narrator describes Oliver’s punishments:

…he was carried every other day into the hall where the boys dined, and there sociably flogged as a public warning and example. And so far from being denied the advantages of religious consolation, he was kicked into the same apartment every evening at prayer-time, and there permitted to listen to, and console his mind with, a general supplication of the boys, containing a special clause, therein inserted by authority of the board, in which they entreated to be made good, virtuous, contented, and obedient, and to be guarded from the sins and vices of Oliver Twist: whom the supplication distinctly set forth to be under the exclusive patronage and protection of the powers of wickedness, and an article direct from the manufactory of the very Devil himself. (16)

Obviously, Bart tames the source material significantly; we are never made witness to Oliver’s being beaten or placed into solitary confinement (though the latter is implied when he is taken offstage). The punishment of Bart’s protagonist is confined mostly to threats by Mr. Bumble:

Oliver!
Oliver!
Never before has a boy wanted more.
Oliver!
Oliver!
Won’t ask for more when he
knows what’s in store.

There’s a dark, thin winding
stairway without any banister.
Which we’ll throw him down
and feed him on cockroaches
served in a canister. (12-13)

The hyperbole here is meant to be humorous and helps to temper the fears we have about Oliver’s fate, much as Dickens tempers such fears through the sarcasm of the narrator in his novel. In “The Fairy World of Oliver Twist,” Richard Hanneford writes that although Oliver is faced with numerous threats throughout the novel, “his trials are never taken too seriously” (34) by the narrator, and consequently, by the reader. In both the original story and the musical, we instinctively know that Oliver is going to live happily ever after. Bart also reduces our anxieties regarding what may happen to Oliver by omitting the scene in which Oliver is sent to be apprenticed to Mr. Gamfield, the abusive chimneysweep—a point in the story described as “the critical moment of Oliver’s fate,” (21), for being apprenticed to Gamfield would be the equivalent of a death sentence for the young orphan. The song does make a vague allusion to the circumstances of the Gamfield episode from the novel, as Bumble sings: “There’s a/ sooty/chimney /long overdue for a/sweeping out. Which we’ll
push him/up and/one day next year with the/rats he’ll be creeping out” (14). Again, the threat seems hyperbolic, primarily due to the fact that it is sung instead of spoken. Whereas Dickens’s Oliver actually does suffer a great many punishments and abuses from his masters, Bart’s version is spared these atrocities, as they would not fit in with the ultimately optimistic vision of the story that Bart presents. Oliver’s greatest challenge in the adaptation is finding
love, whereas his greatest challenge in the original text is managing to survive in a world that
seems determined to destroy him and everything he represents. In the film version of
Oliver!, Sir Carol Reed would place greater emphasis on Oliver’s sufferings in the opening
scenes so as to create a more significant contrast between the workhouse portion of the story
and the infinitely happier London portion (see Chapter 4). Such a contrast is evident in the
original stage show as well, and there is no denying that Fagin’s treatment of the boys in his
gang will prove infinitely preferable to the treatment of the workhouse orphans by Mr.
Bumble.

Another key difference between the workhouse and London relates to the issue of
loneliness. Though Bart spares Oliver from the abusive punishments of Bumble and the
workhouse masters, he does make certain to emphasize the fact that Oliver is very much
alone and vulnerable to such abuses. During the song “Oliver!”, the other workhouse boys
all turn on the title character and cruelly mock him as he is threatened by the beadle and the
widow. The score describes the boys as stating Oliver’s name “tauntingly” (12) when
Bumble inquires as to the identity of the “small rebel” before him, while the prompt book
outlines the blocking of the number, stating that: “All the boys gather round Oliver mocking
him” (7). Our initial sympathy for the orphans following “Food, Glorious Food” sours upon
our realization that, along with imagination and music, the orphans find delight in watching
others suffer. Oliver’s nonconformity, as represented by his asking for more, results in his
being knocked even lower than his fellow workhouse orphans, and the moment after his
descent, the orphans all flaunt their superiority over him. It is the same sort of cynical
commentary on human nature that Dickens himself establishes regarding Oliver’s
mistreatment at the hands of Noah Claypole:
The shop-boys in the neighbourhood had long been in the habit of branding Noah in the public streets, with the ignominious epithets of ‘leathers,’ ‘charity,’ and the like; and Noah had borne them without reply. But, now that fortune had cast in his way a nameless orphan, at whom even the meanest could point the finger of scorn, he retorted on him with interest. This affords charming food for contemplation. It shows us what a beautiful thing human nature may be made to be. (34)

The chief difference of course is that Noah is Oliver’s superior on the social scale, while the workhouse orphans and Oliver share the same humble background. However, there is no true sense of camaraderie or unity amongst the orphans, as is made clear by the quickness with which they turn on Oliver following his disgrace. Bart’s vision of the workhouse and orphans’ farm, while not nearly as violent or repulsive as Dickens’s, is just as harsh in terms of the depiction of Oliver’s solitude and isolation. Even Dickens made sure to give Oliver at least one friend, the pathetic Little Dick with whom he briefly reunites before his journey to London. Bart’s Oliver is utterly friendless, and the lack of unity in the workhouse stands in distinct contrast to the community that Oliver will enter upon his journey to London.

Before proceeding to the next scene, which features the courtship of the Widow Corney by Mr. Bumble—a scene from the novel which, as mentioned in Chapter 1, proved a longstanding favorite with Twist adaptors from the Victorian era onward—some commentary on the satire of the workhouse system (or lack thereof) in the musical seems appropriate, particularly given the criticisms that many American critics leveled against the adaptation regarding the failure of the show to address the social injustices that were so fundamental to Dickens’s original version of the story. As mentioned, incorporating such commentary into the musical would have proved difficult for Bart given that this particular element of the novel is so fundamentally linked to the character of Dickens’s narrator. Neither “Food, Glorious Food,” nor “Oliver!” contain any real instances of social criticism, and the songs focus mostly on the telling of the story as opposed to presenting an allegory on the need for
social justice. Bart relies predominantly on background elements to drop hints of social satire as opposed to providing a more demonstrative form of commentary through the songs being sung onstage. Despite his roots in the politically active left-wing theater troupes of the 1950s and his early membership in Britain’s communist party, Bart refrains from incorporating any overt social criticism into the musical, most likely as a means of ensuring the widespread appeal of the show.

Perhaps the most fundamental justification for Bart’s oversimplified view of the workhouse is that it allows for him to maintain focus on the protagonist as opposed to shifting the focus to a system or social problem. As mentioned, Bart’s Oliver must be more dynamic than his novelistic counterpart in order to hold the interest of the audience, and reducing him to his allegorical role in the novel by focusing on his mistreatment at the hands of those running the workhouse would make it very difficult for audiences to accept the orphan as the hero of the piece. The social satire of the novel dwells predominantly on the events and circumstances surrounding Oliver as opposed to Oliver himself; reducing this element to its bare essentials allows for Bart to place greater emphasis on Oliver.

The second scene of the show is set in Mrs. Corney’s parlour and focuses on Mr. Bumble’s courtship of the workhouse matron. The dialogue between the two characters is lifted mainly from the parallel chapter in the novel, and serves as a lead-in to the next song, “I Shall Scream.” In contrast to the slightly dark humor of the earlier two songs, this number is purely comical and, like many similar scenes from the early Victorian adaptations, is used mainly for comedy relief. Furthermore, the tone of this song, in comparison to that of its predecessor, which was also sung by Bumble and Corney, is very different. The melody to “Oliver!” is slow and authoritative, as is exemplified by the fact that the three notes which
form the main “Oliver!” theme are sung so deliberately, with specific emphasis being placed on each syllable when it is sung: “O-li-ver!/O-li-ver!” (12). “I Shall Scream” contains a far livelier melody and is set to the tempo of a polka. The result is that the number displays the influence of the comic music-hall song on Bart’s writing style yet again. Like most music-hall songs, there is a great deal of humor throughout the number, and the staging of the song, with Mr. Bumble forcibly getting Mrs. Corney to sit on his lap, and Mrs. Corney burying Bumble’s face in her “ample bosom” (19), turns the number into a slapstick comedy sketch. As is the case with traditional music-hall depictions of love and marriage, there is no real sense of true affection here—merely physicality, self-indulgence, and pure comedy. The fact that Mr. Bumble will eventually become so thoroughly henpecked by his wife likewise places the courtship in the music-hall context, as many music-hall ballads focusing on married life emphasized the humorously pessimistic elements of such relationships; as Peter Gammond notes in his description of music-hall songs about marriage, “by this time, the enslaved couple have awoken from love’s dream and found themselves in a pretty pickle. They may have already found out that they cannot stand the sight and sound of one another” (61). Whereas Bumble and Corney used music for authoritative purposes in front of the workhouse orphans in the earlier scene, their private use of music is for more self-indulgent purposes. This self-indulgence is reflective of the self-indulgent “love” that makes up their relationship. Whereas most of the other characters direct their feelings of love toward other people, Bumble and Corney are more focused on themselves rather than each other. Neither one is capable of the idyllic love embodied by Oliver.

Though Bart’s writing of the characters here dates all the way back to Dickens’s original text, the use of a lively song like “I Shall Scream” poses the risk of humanizing Bumble and
Corney to the point that the audience would be unable to accept the fact that Oliver is in any real danger from such people. As such, Bart follows this number up with the decidedly solemn and haunting “Boy For Sale.” This brief interlude reemphasizes the inhumanity of Oliver’s guardians and refocuses the audience on the suffering child and his feelings of neglect. The somber tone of “Boy For Sale” is reinforced through the instruments that are utilized throughout the number, specifically the violin, cello, and bassoon, all of which are used to produce long, somber notes. The song thus helps to prefigure the introduction of Sowerberry, as the number comes across something like a funeral dirge—this is in keeping with the heavy focus on death in the workhouse section of the original novel.²

The introduction of the Sowerberies follows the novel very closely and sets up the next number, “That’s Your Funeral,” which, as mentioned in Chapter 2, was written at the last minute by Lionel Bart due in large part to Barry Humphries’s memorable performance as Mr. Sowerberry in the original Wimbledon production. “That’s Your Funeral,” perhaps more so than any other number in the first half of the show, epitomizes Kincaid’s assertion that most of the humor in Oliver Twist relates to the topic of death. It is an extended version of several of the morbid jokes that Dickens includes in the original text:

“The prices allowed by the board are very small, Mr. Bumble.”

“So are the coffins,” replied the beadle: with precisely as near an approach to a laugh as a great official ought to indulge in.

Mr. Sowerberry was much tickled at this: as of course he ought to be; and laughed a long time without cessation. “Well, well, Mr. Bumble,” he said at length, “there’s no denying that, since the new system of feeding has come in, the coffins are something narrower and more shallow than they used to be…” (26)

²The circumstances presented in the song are actually the reverse of those presented in the novel, however; in the musical, Bumble is selling Oliver, while in the original novel, the workhouse board, wishing to get rid of Oliver quickly, offers a reward of five pounds to anyone who will take him on as an apprentice. The significance of the change is purely negligible. In both cases, the inhumanity of those who have been placed in charge of Oliver is overt.
“That’s Your Funeral” is undoubtedly a very funny number, but it is also incredibly morbid, as the Sowerberries clearly take an unhealthy amount of pleasure in discussing death. Oliver drifts mostly into the background in this song, as the main humor relates to Mr. Sowerberry’s interactions with Mr. Bumble, who is clearly put off by the song. Bumble’s prominence throughout the number is understandable, for it is far more suitable for the audience to laugh at the beadle’s reactions to the Sowerberries as opposed to laughing at poor little Oliver who is now forced to sleep amongst the coffins in the parlor room of Sowerberry’s shop. Coupled with the loneliness he has had to endure all his life, there is now a melancholy air of death surrounding him as well. This contrast between the humor of Mr. Sowerberry’s song and the darkness of Oliver’s situation fits in perfectly with the purposefully incongruous tenor of the early scenes in the original novel: “In denying the possibility of a comic society and yet provoking laughter, the novel continually thwarts and frustrates the reader; for our laughter continues to search for social basis even when there is no longer any support for it in the novel” (Kincaid 51). As in the original text, the Sowerberries are morbidly funny, but there is no sense that they will prove the sort of loving and caring guardians that Oliver so truly deserves. Like “I Shall Scream” before it, “That’s Your Funeral” fills us with a sort of nervous laughter (closely akin to the humor of the novel) that allows us to appreciate the idiosyncratic behavior of these characters while simultaneously despising them for their mistreatment of a helpless child.

Bart again shifts the tone of the scene following the comedy number’s conclusion—Oliver is given the broken scraps of food left for the dog and makes ready to spend his first night sleeping amongst the coffins. While Oliver’s asking for more is the key scene from Dickens’s original text, his singing of “Where is Love?” in the Bart adaptation must share
this distinction when evaluating the musical. “Where is Love?” is Oliver’s only true solo 
number, and like any good theater song in an integrated musical, it is meant to serve a 
purpose within the larger context of the show. It helps to reveal a great deal about Oliver’s 
character, articulating his motivations, desires, and needs.

The lyrics to the song are misleadingly simple and appear, upon first listening, to be 
somewhat generalized. There are moments when it seems as if the song might be sung by 
anyone who is desirous of love, as opposed to the number truly being Oliver’s personal 
ballad. In a review of the original West End soundtrack to Oliver! in Plays & Players, the 
critic was unimpressed with this particular song and dismissed it as nothing more than a 
sentimental pop song sandwiched awkwardly in between numbers that were written in a 
more old-fashioned, music-hall idiom: “There are several songs in contemporary pop style 
that I find positively sickly—Oliver’s ‘Where is Love?’ for instance, though I am sure this 
would have appealed to the very worst in the Victorian novelist who perpetrated the death of 
Little Nell. There is something ludicrous in such a number being sung by little Oliver” (par. 2). Of course, Lionel Bart had started out as a writer of pop songs, and the influence of his 
songwriting roots is evident in several numbers, most particularly, “As Long As He Needs 
Me,” which will be discussed in detail later. The central difference between a theater song 
written for an integrated book show and a pop song written for popular audiences, however, 
is that theater songs are not simply meant to be listened to or danced to—rather, they must 
serve a dramatic function. As mentioned, “Where is Love?” does reveal a great deal about 
Oliver’s character, and the idea that it is “ludicrous” for Oliver to sing such a number is 
inaccurate given the textual basis for several of the statements Oliver makes while singing.
While “Where is Love?” is clearly about the orphan’s desire to find love, the longing that Oliver expresses throughout this number is directed primarily toward the mother he never knew:

Where is she
who I close my eyes to see?
Will I ever know the
sweet hello that’s
meant for only me?

Who can say were she may hide?
Must I travel far and wide?
`’Til I am beside the someone who
I can mean something to. (29-30)

This focus on his deceased mother is taken directly from the novel, for even in death, Agnes manages to embody the compassionate presence of the maternal ideal. Through the abuses Oliver receives in the workhouse, he is able to idealize his own mother by imagining her as the very opposite of the women who take care of him. The situation is wrought with tragic irony: Oliver, so thoroughly abused and neglected by the workhouse matrons, turns all of his untapped adoration toward the maternal ideal he projects on the fleeting images of his own mother.

In the novel, when Oliver reflects on his mother with Mrs. Bedwin, he reveals just how significant an impact Agnes has had on him despite her absence. Having been deathly ill, Oliver ruminates in Chapter XII on the fact that he has felt his mother’s presence throughout his tribulations: “Perhaps she has sat by me. I almost feel as if she had…. Heaven is a long way off; and they are too happy there, to come down to the bedside of a poor boy. But if she knew I was ill, she must have pitied me, even there; for she was very ill herself before she died. She can’t know anything about me though…if she had seen me hurt, it would have made her sorrowful, and her face has always looked sweet and happy, when I have dreamed
of her” (84). Though the metaphysical questions and reflections that Oliver shares with his caretaker are undoubtedly sentimental, much like the lyrics to Bart’s song, the vision he has created of his mother as a devoted and sympathetic protector is what allows him to find the strength to face a world that is openly hostile to both his goodness and his desire for love. Dickens and Bart thus directly connect the protagonist’s unending quest for love with a longing for his mother. Though Agnes is gone, she is hardly forgotten, for she maintains a strong presence within the novel (through Oliver’s incorruptibility) and the musical (through his untiring determination to find love).

“Where is Love?” also reveals that Oliver is open to the possibility of finding some sort of mother figure who will try to take on the role that Agnes was unable to fulfill as a result of her premature passing—since he already knows that his mother is dead, it would not make sense for Oliver to sing about traveling to find her. Thus, his search for the “someone who” he can “mean something to” is a search for a woman who will live up to the ideal of his mother. In the early scenes of the adaptation, Mrs. Corney, Mrs. Sowerberry, and Charlotte all prove poor substitutes. It is only in the latter part of the adaptation that Oliver will find women who are willing to try and take on the role of mother figure. As a song about the desire for love, “Where is Love?” is generalized and sentimental, but as a song about the search for the maternal ideal, the number can easily be linked back to the needs and wants of the character for whom it was written.

Act One, scene four picks up with Oliver’s apprenticeship to Mr. Sowerberry by introducing the obnoxious Noah Claypole. Bart understandably condenses Noah’s role, and the main purpose of the scene is to get to Oliver’s fight with the charity boys so as to precipitate the orphan’s flight to London, where he meets the Artful Dodger. The Dodger’s
“Consider Yourself” is arguably the most popular song that Lionel Bart ever wrote, and it has had the longest afterlife of all of the songs written for *Oliver!*, having been sung in numerous revues, played at various sporting events, and featured on several children’s television programs. The number is fundamentally a song of welcome and a celebration of camaraderie—many people whose impressions of the story of *Oliver Twist* have been shaped by the musical *Oliver!* frequently recall the “friendship” between Oliver Twist and the Dodger as a result. Of course, the relationship between the characters in the novel is quite different.

The actual depiction of the Artful Dodger by Dickens can prove somewhat startling for those who only know *Oliver Twist* through *Oliver!*, for Bart’s Dodger is almost unequivocally likeable while Dickens’s original version of the character is more complicated. Though the author does instill the character with many estimable traits and presents him as being somewhat sympathetic, particularly in comparison to the likes of Fagin and Monks, he does not idealize the young rascal either; though the Dodger is charismatic, friendly, and entertaining, he is also cynical, self-centered, and, of course, a pickpocket. Kincaid is willing to overlook these flaws and links the Dodger back to Dickens’s first great Cockney hero, Sam Weller, in that, like Sam, the Dodger is open, sardonic, and lives his life as “a kind of brilliant parody of social convention” (69). In Kincaid’s view, since the society in which the Dodger lives is corrupt, flawed, and selfish, his defiance of the law is forgivable, perhaps even estimable: “His clever refusal to take this monstrous society seriously is the best defence of the human spirit and the closest thing to a possible alternative to the system we have in the novel” (69). Kincaid neglects to mention the Dodger’s readiness to betray Oliver,
however. The young pickpocket is perfectly willing to let others, including the innocent and vulnerable Oliver, take the blame for his crimes.

Furthermore, when the Dodger is finally caught and put on trial, there is a dark subtext to his humorous defiance of the magistrates and policemen in the courtroom. While the Dodger’s witty repartee with his accusers during his trial scene is somewhat comparable to Sam’s cocky Cockney defiance of Magistrate Nupkins and Sergeant Buzfuz in *The Pickwick Papers*, it is also a disturbing sign of the fact that he has been fully taken in by Fagin’s romanticized view of the criminal world—he behaves exactly as Fagin would want him to: defying the law and refusing to “peach” on his comrades. This testimony ultimately reveals that “the boy is Fagin’s creature, a controlled role-player who revels in his own power and in the myth of criminality which he thinks will give him that power” (John 165). The Dodger attempts to brainwash Oliver in the same way Fagin has brainwashed him by lecturing him on the joys of being a “prig,” but the parodist spirit of the Dodger’s personality cannot save the young pickpocket from transportation.

Oliver does not find it particularly difficult to resist the Dodger in the novel given his own inherent sense of morality, which serves to shield him from the influence of characters like Dawkins, Bates, and Fagin. Interestingly, Oliver seems determined to resist the Dodger from the moment they meet. Whereas the musical, at least in the first act, emphasizes a burgeoning friendship between the Dodger and Oliver, the novel immediately depicts Oliver as being suspicious of the Dodger and his intentions. The narrator notes Oliver’s fears that there is something not quite right about his new acquaintance: “Under this impression, he secretly resolved to cultivate the good opinion of the old gentleman as quickly as possible; and, if he found the Dodger incorrigible, as he more than half suspected he should, to decline
the honour of his farther acquaintance’” (59). In the musical, Bart eliminates Oliver’s reservations regarding the Dodger and has him unhesitatingly join the young prig in singing “Consider Yourself.”

While this may be unfaithful to the text as Dickens wrote it, it feels almost natural that Oliver should gravitate toward the Artful Dodger given his charisma and Cockney congeniality. Conversely, Oliver’s suspicions toward the Dodger in the novel seem premature and unjustifiable, particularly given the friendly overtures the Dodger makes toward his new companion. In Oliver Twist: Whole Heart and Soul, Dunn notes that this scene in the novel is handled rather clumsily by the young Dickens. There is no genuine basis for the initial disapproval that Oliver shows toward the Dodger, and before he has even gotten to know the young man, he seems ready to forego his friendship (Dunn 54-56). Kincaid agrees with this assertion, noting that Oliver’s entry into Fagin’s world through the Dodger “provides a release from misery, starvation, and most important, from loneliness….The Dodger is the first person to express spontaneous and real concern for Oliver. He is the first to provide an alternative to the most horrifying part of the orphan’s early life: its desolation” (72). Given that the Dodger takes an active interest in Oliver, speaks kindly to him, buys him food, and does what he can to help him recover from his journey to London, Oliver’s suspicions seem all the more unreasonable.

The absence of such suspicions in the adaptation allows for “Consider Yourself” to unfold as a purely celebratory number. Oliver has escaped the workhouse and the Sowerberries—now, the chance for the orphan to create a happier life for himself finally seems possible. Furthermore, the search for love has finally yielded some promising results: a new friend.

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3 The prompt book indicates that Oliver hesitates to shake the Dodger’s hand when they meet, though no such note is included in the actual libretto (29). Furthermore, he joins in singing “Consider Yourself” immediately thereafter.
The Dodger’s use of the plural pronoun “we” as opposed to the singular “I” throughout the song emphasizes the inviting hospitality of London, for as the number expands and the chorus grows, the entire city seems determined to welcome Oliver: “We’ve/taken to you/so/strong/It’s/clear/ we’re/going to get a/long” (36). Thus, London is immediately depicted as a more hospitable environment than either of Oliver’s previous homes.

Though the chorus in this number is made up of a wide variety of characters, the subject matter of the song hints that it is mainly a working-class number; the script lists the chorus as being made up of “Porters, Children, Street Vendors, Tumblers” (37) and the lyrics repeatedly imply that the characters singing this song are in relatively difficult financial straits, though they are optimistic that things will get better:

If it should chance to be we should see some harder days, empty larder days why grouse?

Always a chance we’ll meet somebody to foot the bill, then the drinks are on the house! (37-38)

The second verse expresses a similar sentiment when the Dodger describes the need to be “handy wiv’ a/rolling pin” (40) when the landlord comes around to collect his rent. Clearly, the characters singing this song are not well-off financially, but this does not dampen their spirits nor weaken their sense of camaraderie—a critically important facet of the depiction of the lower-class characters in this musical, and moreover, in virtually every other musical that Bart wrote.
Bart’s reputation in the British musical theater is built partially upon his having broken from the upper-class traditions of Novello and, by so doing, created a new kind of English musical that had its roots in the more populist entertainment of the music hall. In a sense, Dickens provided him with the perfect subject matter for musical adaptation given that Dickens was one of the first novelists in the history of British literature to take a populist approach to writing. Not only were his novels financially accessible to the masses because of the serialized publishing technique that he utilized, but they were likewise accessible from a thematic point of view given that Dickens frequently focused on working-class characters with working-class problems. “Consider Yourself” epitomizes the populism of both Dickens and Bart, as the Dodger presents a congenial philosophy of cooperation and camaraderie within the lower orders. The young pickpocket’s insistence that “what/ever/we’ve got we/share” (37) is the first true indication of fellowship in the musical, and the Dodger proves that such fellowship can exist even amongst those who have so little. The communal vision of low-class London is an overwhelmingly positive contrast to the dog-eat-dog mentality of the workhouse.

To reinforce the low-class tenor of the song, Bart has the Dodger maintain his Cockney accent while singing, and though the lyrics are not as explicitly Cockney as the words to the songs that Bart had written previously for Fings, there is the same sense of working-class celebration incorporated into the song—the Dodger is in many ways a pint-sized version of some of the criminal characters featured in the previous musical. The upshot of the number is highly similar to many of the songs in Fings as well: the audience is filled with a sense of appreciation for the rough yet congenial society of the low-class characters. These
sentiments will be taken even further in the next scene with the introduction of Fagin and the
gang.

The first appearance of Fagin is lifted directly from the novel, with the old man emerging
from the kitchen, toasting fork in hand. In the original text, the image of the bearded, red-
haired man—unflatteringly described by the narrator as “a very old shrivelled Jew [with a]
villainous-looking and repulsive face” (63)—standing over the fire and holding a fork is
obviously evocative of traditional representations of the devil, and the novel’s version of the
character comes quite close to living up to this reputation. However, the satanic imagery
incorporated into the character’s introduction belies the fact that the Bart musical will present
a new variation on Fagin. This version of the character will prove himself an entertaining
showman and Jewish den-mother as opposed to a conniving devil and anti-Semitic
stereotype.

Fagin’s introduction brings into focus what is arguably the most significant change that
Bart made to the Dickensian source in writing Oliver! A person familiar with the story of
Twist through the musical would undoubtedly be taken aback by the contrasts between Bart’s
Fagin and the character as he was originally written by Dickens. Whereas Dickens’s Fagin is
remembered as a monstrous corrupter who, from the moment he is introduced, is linked to all
that is evil, Bart depicts the old man as a lively and entertaining Pied Piper who serves as
both a mentor and protector to his young charges. Dickens’s Fagin is perfectly willing to use
violence as a means to an end, whether he is beating up on Oliver and the Dodger,
manipulating Sikes to commit murder, or sending former cohorts to the gallows; Bart’s Fagin
seems wholly incapable of such atrocities. In short, rather than using Fagin, one of Dickens’s
most despicable characters, as the villain of the piece, Bart re-imagines the old fence as a co-
protagonist to the show’s title character. Theatergoers realized how central this reinvention was to the tone of Bart’s adaptation. W.A. Darlington, a critic at the *Daily Telegraph* who reviewed the first performance of *Oliver!* on June 30, 1960 claimed that “Lionel Bart had obviously realized that if he was to compose music, lyrics and book for a musical with the cheerful title of ‘Oliver!’ he must lighten the gloom of the Dickensian story noticeably, though not fundamentally. This he has managed very successfully by a simple device. He has transformed Fagin” (P15). The revised version of Fagin epitomizes Bart’s approach to the source material.

There were practical reasons for making Fagin and Oliver co-protagonists, despite the fact that they stand at opposite ends of the spectrum of good and evil in Dickens’s original text. Though Bart’s Oliver is livelier and more assertive than his novelistic counterpart, he is still a character based on a one-dimensional representation of goodness—if the musical focused entirely on Oliver, the audience would eventually grow frustrated with the character’s limitations. Unlike Oliver, Fagin possesses enough vitality, passion, and vigor to engage the audience for extended periods of time. Furthermore, Fagin presents the chance for greater diversity from a musical standpoint. Though “Where is Love?” is fully integrated into the musical, both from the point of view of the story and thematically, it is different from Fagin’s songs, not only because of its more melancholy content, but likewise, because of the idiom in which it is written: “Where is Love?” is largely a pop number, while nearly all of Fagin’s songs have their roots in the music hall. Even more striking is the fact that Fagin seems conscious of this connection. Thus, whenever the old man performs a musical number, he acts as though he is aware of the shift from spoken words to music. Fagin takes every opportunity to “ham up” his performance, flaunting his music-hall personality and taking
great satisfaction in just how entertaining he can be. We are never quite sure what he is
going to do next, as he adopts a falsetto in “Pick a Pocket or Two,” steps into different
rhythms and syncopations in “Reviewing the Situation,” and briefly sings the female part in
“I’d Do Anything.” Whereas Oliver uses music mainly to express deep feelings, Fagin uses
music not only to explain what he is experiencing, but simultaneously, to entertain his young
charges (and the audience). Indeed, Fagin and Nancy, two characters from the lowest end of
the social spectrum, both understand the fundamental importance of performance to keeping
one’s hopes up, and the two characters both succeed in transforming ordinary spaces into
theaters and music halls: Fagin describes the thieves’ den as a “stage” at one point in the
musical, and Nancy and the Dodger’s “performance” of “I’d Do Anything” later in the show
is set up as if it is taking place in front of a theatergoing audience. Fagin is therefore both a
musical character and a musical performer, fully conscious of the power of music and song
to draw people to him.

At first glance, Bart’s Fagin bears little semblance to Dickens’s version of the character.
Nevertheless, I would argue that Bart’s reinterpretation of Fagin is not nearly as far removed
from the original novel as some critics have asserted, at least from a thematic standpoint.
Fagin and the Artful Dodger steal every scene in Lionel Bart’s show, and the two characters
frequently manage to do likewise in Dickens’s novel. The scenes set in Fagin’s den are
undoubtedly the most entertaining chapters in the story, and the conviviality and camaraderie
of Fagin’s hideout is inestimably more alluring than the squalor, loneliness, and misery of the
workhouse or the orphans’ farm. What makes this situation all the more fascinating,
however, is the fact that there are moments when Fagin’s den seems more inviting than the
bourgeoisie, middle-class world of the Brownlow-Maylie faction. Here, Kincaid’s examination of the function of laughter in the novel again proves useful:

The opposition between the worlds of Fagin and Rose Maylie has often been discussed, and it seems clear that no one really likes, believes in, or remembers Rose and that everyone is somehow attracted to Fagin. Part of the reason for this has already been discussed: the rhetoric of laughter, which provides for a sympathetic alignment with the victims. But the social implications of these two worlds, the kinds of homes they provide for the reader, need to be investigated further.

As it is first introduced, Fagin’s world is, in almost every way, a distinctly positive contrast to the one Oliver had known. It provides a release from misery, starvation, and, most important, loneliness….It is certainly better to be a thief than to be alone: the whole emotional force of the novel has made that clear. (71-72)

Whereas the humor in the early workhouse scenes (and in the early songs in the musical) is morbid, there is no such fear of looming mortality permeating the thieves’ den. Rather, Fagin and his followers are defined by “one vigorous and persuasive life-force” (Kincaid 73). While Dickens depicts this life-force through Fagin’s dynamic influence over his charges, Bart uses music-hall songs and performance styles to convey the old man’s vivacity. Given that Nancy later sings a number entitled “It’s A Fine Life” with the gang of pickpockets, it is clear that Bart understood the allure of Fagin’s world. The composer successfully captures this allure through music, as the songs sung by Fagin and the thieves are by far the most entertaining and engaging numbers in the entire piece. Conversely, Bart keeps the middle-class world of the Brownlow faction silent, as will be discussed later.

Returning to the contrasts between Dickens’s Fagin and Bart’s version of the character, it slowly becomes clear that the musical’s portrayal of the old fence is not nearly as unfaithful to the text as several critics have stated. Dickens depicts Fagin and his group of followers with such a vividness and vitality that it is impossible to believe he did not sympathize with them to a certain extent. As mentioned in Chapter 1, few readers of Oliver Twist have
expressed much regard for Boz’s depiction of the Maylie family, as is made evident by the fact that these characters have rarely appeared in stage or screen adaptations of the text. While characters like Mrs. Maylie and Harry are easily forgotten, characters like Fagin, Nancy, the Artful Dodger, and Sikes have all become fundamental to the culture text of the novel. Even more important is the fact that Fagin, for all his wickedness, unquestionably serves as a care-taker for the boys: his constant references to his charges as “my dears” and his willingness to cook for them and provide them with clothes establishes him as being almost maternal in his treatment of the gang. Bart himself described Fagin as a “mother hen” (qtd. in Roper 40) of sorts, and the musical version of the character accentuates the positive and protective qualities of the old man while toning down the more sinister aspects of his personality.

Fagin’s most striking quality in both the novel and the musical, however, is his vigor. In a story that focuses heavily on the subject of death, Fagin possesses a liveliness and energy that is contagious. Indeed, his energetic personality is what makes him so dangerous, for the children in his gang are all instinctively drawn to him because of this energy. Fagin is constantly making jokes and playing games with his pupils, which seems to blind them to the squalor of their surroundings. Whereas the grim realities of the workhouse are reinforced by the tyrannical board of directors and the horrid matrons like Mrs. Corney and Mrs. Mann, Fagin injects imagination and humor into the thieves’ den. Even Oliver, who is the embodiment of unadulterated goodness, begins to fall under Fagin’s spell, as he finds the old man’s stories, jokes, and games enthralling, particularly in contrast to the miseries he suffered while on his own in the workhouse. This is not to say that Dickens’s Fagin is in any way an admirable human being. In fact, here again is one of the chief threats associated with
the old man—his ability to manipulate the thoughts, feelings, desires, and ideals of others. As mentioned, the Dodger’s behavior during his trial reinforces the perils of trusting in Fagin’s worldview. Kincaid notes that Fagin uses imagination and laughter to help Bates overcome the loss of his best friend, but this discounts the fact that the Dodger would never have found himself in this situation had it not been for the influence of Fagin’s worldview in the first place. For certain, the old man does a great deal more harm than good in the novel and the buildup toward his execution in the penultimate chapter, though terrifying and grotesque, never seems wholly undeserved either. The fact remains, however, that Fagin, for all of his wickedness and immorality, is a captivating figure for characters within the novel, and moreover, for the reader.

Bart makes several changes to Fagin and transfers some of the old man’s more violent and detestable qualities to Sikes, as will be discussed later in this chapter. Despite these modifications, Bart successfully captures the sheer energy of Dickens’s character in his adaptation. Fagin sings almost all of his most lively and entertaining songs in front of the boys, and the fact that his pupils make up his primary audience serves to underscore the charismatic magnetism that draws the boys to him: “Pick a Pocket or Two” seems lifted directly from Dickens’s text, as Fagin uses games and jokes to teach the boys the art of crime. Other songs involving the boys and the various other criminals associated with Fagin’s world include “It’s a Fine Life,” “I’d Do Anything,” and “Oom-Pah-Pah,” all of which are large and lively chorus numbers performed by lowly but loveable members of London’s underworld, most of whom are intimately connected with Fagin and his pupils. These songs stand in opposition to the numbers from the first scenes in the musical; not only is the overall tone lighter and happier, but there is more energy, vitality, and joy than can be
found in any of the songs featured in the workhouse or Sowerberry scenes. Indeed, there is something celebratory about each of the numbers involving Fagin and his gang: “Pick a Pocket or Two” rejoices in the thrill of the successfully executed crime, while “Be Back Soon” celebrates the camaraderie of the thieves’ den and Fagin’s role as both master and protector. “It’s a Fine Life” and “I’d Do Anything” contain merry mockeries of middle-class morality, as the thieves and paupers unhesitatingly prefer the vitality of their own circle to the priggishness of the bourgeoisie. “Oom-Pah-Pah” exults in the more physical elements of an underprivileged lifestyle, celebrating sexual flirtation and alcohol. The overall portrait of the thieves’ den is thus extremely positive, particularly in comparison to the gloomy portrayal of the workhouse and the undertaker’s parlour. Whereas most of the songs which open the musical focus on deprivation, death, or dejection, the songs sung by Fagin’s gang are animated triumphs.

Though critics of the musical have decried such modifications to Dickens’s dark and dangerous portrait of the underworld in the original novel, they have neglected the fact that the lively and celebratory elements which Bart incorporates into his adaptation are actually detectable—if somewhat subtle—components of Dickens’s original work. Moreover, like Dickens, Bart ends up presenting the audience with such a lively portrayal of the thieves’ den that we are left to wonder whether or not Oliver is losing something by making the transition to a member of the middle class. Dickens describes Oliver as being “domesticated” by the Maylie family, and the reader gets the sense that Oliver will never be as fully alive as the likes of the Dodger, Bet, and Charley Bates, for he will lack the sense of deprivation that drives the thieves to live their lives to the fullest and to utilize their imaginations.
The staging of “Pick a Pocket or Two” compliments the music-hall roots of the song: it is as much a comedy skit as a song, and the heart of the number lies in its performance. Of course, “Pick a Pocket or Two” has its roots in the original novel, specifically in the scene where Fagin and his pupils play their merry “game”:

When the breakfast was cleared away; the merry old gentleman and the two boys played at a very curious and uncommon game, which was performed in this way. The merry old gentleman, placing a snuff-box in one pocket of his trousers, a note-case in the other, and a watch in his waistcoat pocket, with a guard-chain round his neck, and sticking a mock diamond pin in his shirt: buttoned his coat tight round him, and putting his spectacle-case and handkerchief in his pockets, trotted up and down the room with a stick, in imitation of the manner in which old gentlemen walk about the streets any hour in the day. (67-68)

The meticulousness of Dickens’s listing of virtually every item that Fagin utilizes in playing the game is matched onstage in the Bart musical, for every single item that Fagin places on his person is removed by one of the boys through some sort of visual gag: two of the boys play a “mock game of hop-skotch” (Score 52), bump into Fagin, and steal his spectacle case; another boy pretends to have something in his eye, and as Fagin bends down to assist him, the boy removes his watch; a group of the boys draw Fagin’s attention toward something in the sky and as he looks away, one of them steals his handkerchief; one boy kicks his cane out from under him and he falls to the floor, they steal his other handkerchief and the cane itself; and finally, the Dodger and Charley use a game of leapfrog to steal Fagin’s last spectacle case from his back pocket. Each theft is its own humorous little sketch set to music.

Moreover, the fact that the boys use their own variations on traditional games such as hopscotch and leapfrog while stealing Fagin’s possessions highlights the fact that the thieves’ den is a far more playful environment than any of the other places which Oliver has visited previously. Whereas the workhouse forces children to labor like animals, Fagin’s den revolves around music and play.
Equally important to the music-hall style of “Pick a Pocket or Two” is the manner that Fagin assumes when playing the game with his pupils. The prompt book notes that “Fagin straightens fingerless mittens, smoothes moustache, takes walking-stick & pushes nose in air” (35). Fagin is mockingly mimicking the mincing mannerisms of a middle-class gentleman, and having Fagin adopt these mannerisms while singing a music-hall song reinforces the influence of the music-hall tradition on the score to Oliver! Like the low-class patrons of a Victorian music hall, Fagin’s boys take delight in the spectacle placed “onstage” before them. This technique is also essential to Bart’s preserving the Englishness of the source, as the music-hall element of songs like “Pick a Pocket or Two” corresponds perfectly with the story’s Dickensian roots.

Following the end of the number, Bart incorporates several scenes from the original novel into the thieves’ den sequence, including the scene in which Fagin receives the boys’ pickings, and subsequently, the scene in which Oliver awakens to find the old man poring over his private treasures. The arrival of Nancy and Bet then sets the stage for the next pair of songs: “It’s A Fine Life” and “I’d Do Anything.” Nancy will of course prove fundamentally important to the adaptation, while Bet is, at best, a supporting player. The disproportion of their roles stems all the way back to the Victorian adaptations of Twist—Nancy became an increasingly important stage character as the century progressed, while Bet was virtually ignored by the hack playwrights who adapted the novel. Lean also omits the character from his film version. Nevertheless, the inclusion of Bet helps to broaden the scope of the musical by including yet another female character in the thieves’ den scenes; simultaneously, Bet’s interactions with Nancy flesh out Nancy’s role as a mother-figure to

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4 Furthering the music-hall format of the number is the depiction of Fagin as a magician of sorts, as is made evident by the trick string of handkerchiefs he uses when playing the pickpocket game with Oliver during the reprise of the song.
the inhabitants of the thieves’ den. Bart modifies the character’s age, as the libretto describes Bet as “a 13-year-old lass in Fagin’s establishment [who] idolizes Nancy” (2). Thus, Nancy, presented as a full ten years Bet’s senior, takes on a protective role with the girl that is somewhat analogous to the Dodger’s relationship with Oliver or Fagin’s relationship with the boys; in all of these cases, the camaraderie and loyalty of the thieves’ den stands out in comparison to the disunity and loneliness of the workhouse. Fagin and Nancy may be low-class parental figures, but they nevertheless fill a large gap in the lives of the boys and Bet, providing them with protection, sustenance, and perhaps most importantly, companionship. Nancy’s maternal nature is repeatedly emphasized throughout “It’s A Fine Life,” as she assists Fagin and Bet in serving the boys their breakfast and tries to brighten their spirits through her lively singing. This element of her personality will come to play an even more significant role in the musical toward the end of the play when she takes Oliver under her protection and tries to shield him from Sikes.

As described in Chapter 2, both “It’s A Fine Life” and “I’d Do Anything” reinforce the influence of the music hall on Bart’s technique—Nancy and Bet both revel in the same low-class pleasures that would have been enjoyed by working-class visitors to the music hall while simultaneously decrying the stuffiness and hypocrisy of middle-class morality. For the girls, as well as Fagin’s boys, life really is a “merry/dance” (59) in spite of all the hardships they must endure. Nancy in particular seems to take pride in the fact that the life she leads is one of friendship and pleasure even if it is simultaneously marked by a significant amount of hardship: “When you’ve/got someone to/love./you forget your care and/strife. Let the/prudes look down on us. Let the/wide world frown on us. It’s a/fine, fine/life” (59-60). Rather than
focus on all that she does not have, Nancy delights in what she does possess and appreciates life’s “small pleasures” more than a pampered middle-class lady would.

Of course, no discussion of the character of Nancy can avoid the issue of her profession. Memorably, Dickens does not directly state that Nancy is a prostitute in the original text, though he would later do so in the 1841 Preface. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to pick up on the fact that Nancy and Bet are prostitutes given the narrator’s none-too-subtle hints. Bart, like Dickens, never truly reveals Nancy as a prostitute. Her character description in the original libretto lists her as a “graduate of Fagin’s academy and Bill’s doxy” (2). While the latter part of this description establishes her as a “fallen woman,” the former part seems to imply that she is a thief as opposed to a streetwalker. The hints dropped during some of her songs are likewise ambiguous. In “It’s A Fine Life,” she sings: “We wander/through London/Who knows what we may/find?/There’s pockets/left undone/on many a behind” (60). Nancy’s description of wandering through London seems to hint toward her being a prostitute, while her description of people’s pockets being left undone again links her to the pickpockets in Fagin’s gang. Later, when she is asked to sing “Oom-Pah-Pah” at the Three Cripples, the line becomes blurred further—London music-hall culture was repeatedly associated with the prostitution epidemic that plagued the city throughout the Victorian era (see Chapter 5).

Here, Bart’s modifications to Bet’s character become somewhat troubling, though this is perhaps the only true instance of subtle yet passionate social criticism that we find in the musical adaptation. Bet is only thirteen, yet she is a protégé of Nancy’s, and thus most likely a practitioner of the same profession. While child prostitution seems a very weighty subject for such a lighthearted musical, it is quite logical that Bet’s sole means of providing for
herself is to follow Nancy’s example. The fact that the boys can only find refuge with a thief like Fagin, while a girl like Bet can only find refuge with a prostitute like Nancy, creates a genuine sense of disgust with the society being presented, mainly because it necessitates the boys becoming thieves and the girl becoming a prostitute. What can one expect, however, when the only hope and aid that this society can offer the poor is the workhouse? Clearly, Fagin and Nancy are not blameworthy here; if anything, these circumstances make them more sympathetic, for, despite the immorality of their lifestyles, they have done what they can to rescue their young charges from the starvation, abuse, and neglect epitomized by the workhouse. By flouting the laws of a corrupt and cruel society—a society whose hypocrisy is made tangible through the passage of the Poor Laws—the thieves have managed to create their own far happier society that is based around camaraderie and companionship. It is clearly a “fine life” for those involved.

Though “It’s A Fine Life” is a merry song, Bart makes certain to drop hints that Nancy’s fondness for the life she leads is tempered somewhat by her tumultuous relationship with Sikes, who has not yet been introduced. In one verse of the song, Nancy jokes that: “Tho’ you/ sometimes do come/by, the occasional black/eye. You can/always cover one `til he/blacks the other one but you/don’t dare/cry” (61). Though the lyrics are sung in a lighthearted way, the issue of Nancy’s being abused by Sikes is hardly humorous. In many ways, Nancy fits in with a tradition of abused heroines in musical theater, including Julie in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s Carousel, most of who are willing to put up with physical cruelty out of their devotion to the men they love. The depiction is disturbing, particularly in this day and age, though Bart’s representation of Nancy’s unwavering devotion to Sikes (in spite of his abusiveness) clearly has its roots in Dickens. As John Ferns notes: “Nancy’s
fidelity to Sikes is, perhaps, the most moving idea in the book. She desires a love that Sikes, because of his brutal conditioning…is unable to give her” (90). Toward the end of “It’s A Fine Life,” Nancy expresses her wishes for the kind of life that Sikes is unable to provide her, as she laments that the life she leads is “Not for/me the happy/home, happy/husband, happy/wife” (63). She consoles herself by embracing Bet, her surrogate daughter/sister, but the issues regarding her relationship with Sikes have hardly been resolved—in fact, they will become all the more difficult as the play progresses. Given that Bart’s adaptation is thematically structured around the desire for love, Nancy’s relationship with Sikes allows the musical to take on truly tragic dimensions that serve to balance out the lighter and happier moments in the story.

“It’s A Fine Life” is followed almost immediately by “I’d Do Anything,” which is similar in its parody of middle-class culture, but simultaneously far more tender than its predecessor. The sentiments being expressed in the song recount the genuine fondness that these characters have for one another, and when Oliver takes up the song in its second verse, the warmth of these sentiments becomes all the more clear as Oliver’s previous solo was all about the desire for love. Ultimately, “I’d Do Anything” has far more in common with the sentimental ballads of the music hall as opposed to the more satirical comic songs that defined early music-hall culture. There is also a somewhat diegetic tenor to the song as Fagin actually instructs Nancy to sing for the group. Once again, the music-hall roots of Bart’s score shine through, and Nancy will later reveal herself to be a very capable music-hall performer during “Oom-Pah-Pah.”

Interestingly, due in large part to the popularity of the film version of the musical, the number is sometimes mistakenly remembered as a duet between Oliver and Nancy—hence,
the song title was adopted for the BBC reality TV series that focused on the casting of these two roles for the 2009 West End revival. Oliver and Nancy do not actually sing together in the original version of the song, however. Rather, the song is structured as two separate duets: one between the Dodger and Nancy, and the other between Oliver and Bet. Nancy and Oliver’s interactions are kept quite brief in the original libretto. The idea of parody here takes on an added dimension. Not only do the Dodger and Nancy parody the behavior of upper-class couples, but Oliver and Bet duplicate the behavior of the Dodger and Nancy. Just as Bet seems to enjoy trying to be like Nancy, Oliver repeatedly tries to be like the Dodger, even during the earlier number “Consider Yourself” where he tries to duplicate the Dodger’s movements and verses. All of this behavior highlights the importance of showmanship to the thieves and the other low-class characters, as they are all constantly trying to entertain one another—usually by having a good laugh at the “prudes” who look down on them. When Fagin and the rest of the boys get in on the act toward the end of the song, with Fagin humorously singing the female part of the number while the boys mockingly sing of their devotion to him, this caricature-based humor is fully emphasized.

Furthermore, “I’d Do Anything” is another number that epitomizes the contrasts between the thieves’ den and the workhouse. In the middle of the song, following Nancy’s verse with the Dodger, Fagin and Nancy encourage Oliver to join in:

**FAGIN**
Now you Oliver…

**NANCY**
You do everything you saw him do. And I’ll tell you all the words you don’t know. (52)

As in the case of “Consider Yourself,” Oliver is invited to join in the celebration—a distinct divergence from the earlier songs where he is either excluded, threatened, or mocked. The
loneliness and neglect of the workhouse is replaced by the companionship and active interest of the thieves’ kitchen, as Fagin, Nancy, the Artful Dodger, and Bet do what they can to make Oliver feel at home in their circle. The immorality of the thieves’ den seems forgivable under these circumstances—the thieves are willing to show compassion toward a helpless child and make him feel wanted for the first time in his life.

No sooner has “I’d Do Anything” concluded, but yet another number begins: “Be Back Soon.” While musicals should of course use music to tell the story, the gaps between the songs in *Oliver!*, particularly upon the introduction of the thieves’ kitchen, are very short. Song is the dominant means of expression in the thieves’ den, and the number of sung lines far eclipses the number of spoken lines in Fagin’s loft. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Bart’s structuring of the musical score prefigures the structuring of many of the mega-musicals that would define British and European musical theater in the 1980s.

“Be Back Soon” is used mainly as a transitional number to move the boys out of the thieves’ den and transform the stage into the London street setting so as to set up the conclusion to Act I. Still, the number helps to reveal more of Fagin’s character to the audience. While there is the same wiliness featured in “Pick a Pocket or Two, his concern for the boys seems genuine in this number: “I love you that’s why/I say cheery/o, not good/bye. Don’t be/gone long be back/soon” (72). Fagin has previously been shown cooking for the boys and taking care of their physical needs. He has also helped to fill an emotional gap for the young urchins, providing them with laughter and companionship. “Be Back Soon” resolves any suspicions we have about the old man using the boys solely for his own purposes, for now he has openly admitted to his care for his protégés and his desire to keep them safe. Bart’s assertions that “Where is Love?” is the thematic centerpiece to
*Oliver!* instantly becomes more acceptable, and, as the composer asserted in his letter to Moody, Fagin himself seems to have been driven by the desire for love and fraternity, as is evident in his close relationship with the boys. His regard for his young charges is reciprocated, as they promise not to “let our/dear old Fagin/worry” (70). The thieves’ den again proves a loving environment.

The lyrics and blocking here also place particular emphasis on Fagin’s role as a sort of Pied Piper who has charmed the boys into following his lead; Dodger cleverly sings of Fagin that: “It’s/him that pays the/piper. It’s/us that pipes his/tune” (70). Fagin is described as leading the boys through the thieves’ kitchen in “pied piper fashion” (Score 73), and the use of woodwind instruments and whistling throughout the song underscores the allusion. The idea of Fagin as the Piper goes back to the earlier discussion of his charisma and magnetism. Though not armed with a magic flute, Fagin, like the Piper, uses music to charm his charges and draw them closer to him. While some of the sinister elements of the Pied Piper story are present in Fagin as well, his concern for the safety of his charges, as revealed in this number, offsets such elements.

The first act reaches its conclusion with the picking of Mr. Brownlow’s pocket by the Artful Dodger and the subsequent arrest of Oliver—this scene proved a popular ending point to the first act of many Victorian era adaptations of *Twist* as well. Dickens’s description of Oliver’s flight in the original novel is long and rambling, with the narrator waxing philosophically on the qualities in human nature that make the pursuit of a fugitive so tempting; he likewise comments on the elements of human nature represented by Bates and the Dodger, both of whom betray Oliver the first chance that they get. Though the pursuit of Oliver in Bart’s musical was staged elaborately on the Kenny set and accompanied by a long
musical interlude, as detailed in the prompt book and musical score, the actual libretto presents only a brief allusion to the incident—moreover, Bart omits the Dodger’s betrayal of Oliver, and the prompt book describes the young pickpocket as trying desperately to aid in Oliver’s escape before the police can catch him (53 B). The loyalty and camaraderie that exists within the thieves’ den is reinforced once more. The Dodger cannot prevent Oliver’s capture, however, and the boy is hauled off by the police at the end of the scene. For the first time since arriving in London, Oliver finds himself in a disheartening situation, and the specters of the abuse, misery, and loneliness that he suffered in the workhouse and with the Sowerberries seem set to reappear. Bart will once again shield his protagonist from the horrors faced by his novelistic counterpart, however, as he excises the traumatic scene set in Magistrate Fang’s courtroom. By the time that Oliver is reintroduced in Act II, he is already safe, sound, and living a life of luxury in Mr. Brownlow’s house.

Act II typically proves to be one of the most difficult points in a musical. Stephen Citron notes that, “when critics zero in for the kill on a musical, they usually attack the second act” (148). While the first acts of most musicals end on an emotional high point, good second acts should actually surpass their predecessors by creating true climaxes before the show concludes. However, such climaxes must proceed naturally from Act I. An audience expects the second act to tie up all of the play’s loose ends.

Sustaining the momentum of Act I can prove difficult in a musical, particularly a musical like Oliver! which features so many memorable songs over such a short period of time in the first act. Complicating this matter further in the case of Bart’s show is the fact that Oliver! is an adaptation of a long and complex novel with an extremely complicated denouement: the revelation of Oliver’s parentage alone, though presented in a single chapter, is especially
convoluted. In Act II of *Oliver!*, Bart is forced to condense the story significantly. In spite of the frequent outcries of infidelity leveled against *Oliver!*, Act I actually follows the plot of Dickens’s novel very closely. However, this act only covers the first ten chapters of a fifty-three chapter novel. Consolidating ten chapters into a single act is difficult enough, but consolidating forty-three chapters is all but impossible. This is where the Lean film serves as an especially useful resource for Bart in that Lean was able to trim all the fat from Dickens’s text and present a much more streamlined and fast-paced version of Oliver’s story. However, Lean had luxuries that Bart did not thanks to the medium of film, and given that Bart had to make sure to leave room for the music and songs that help to make up the second act, Oliver’s journey from rags to riches had to be restructured even further.

Surprisingly, in spite of just how much of Oliver’s story is left to be told, Bart chooses to take his time in getting the second act started. The opening number to Act II, “Oom-Pah-Pah,” is a lively and engaging number, but it has absolutely nothing to do with the plot or characters, nor does it move the story forward in any way. Instead, it is a fully diegetic number, sung by Nancy at the Three Cripples. Nevertheless, “Oom-Pah-Pah” is the number most directly influenced by the music-hall tradition in which Bart was writing, and thus its main purpose is to serve as a tribute to the institution of the music hall itself. Nancy performs the song at the request of a character called the “Chairman.” Chairman was the title given to emcees in early Victorian music halls, which means that the Three Cripples, as re-imagined by Bart, is a tavern that is rapidly making the transition into a more formalized music hall (hence the presence of a master of ceremonies). The song Nancy sings epitomizes music-hall entertainment; not only is it a funny and bawdy song with an infinitely catchy melody, but it is also one in which the audience is encouraged to participate. Nancy has the
Chorus members join her whenever she repeats the song’s refrain, just as a Victorian music-hall performer would have done:

Mr. Percy Snodgrass
would often have the odd glass,
but never when he thought
anybody could see

Secretly he’d buy it,
and drink it on the quiet,
and dream he was an earl
with a girl on each knee

Oom-pah-pah!
Oom-pah-pah!
That’s how it goes

Oom-pah-pah!
Oom-pah-pah!
Everyone knows

What is the cause of his
red shiny nose?
Could it be
Oom-pah-pah?

Pretty little Sally
goes walking down the alley,
displays her pretty ankles
to all of the men

They could see her garters,
but not for free and gratis.
An inch or two, and then
she knows when to say when. (83-86)

The lyrics to the song, though not explicit, focus on drinking and sexual situations, two of the most common topics of early music hall songs. The refrain of the song is likewise reminiscent of the music hall. Christopher Pulling writes about the typical chorus to a musical-hall song, which might have gone something like: “‘Tooral-li-ooral-li-ooral-li-ay’ or ‘Tiddie-iddi-iddie-iddie-ol-li-do,’ or ‘Fold-de-rol-de-ri-do.’ Superior persons are apt to
claim that that was all the old music hall songs did consist of” (123). Of course, music-hall songs were more than just popular ballads featuring onomatopoeic lyrics, but this was nevertheless one of the most common conventions of the ballads sung in music halls, including the immortal “Ta-ra-ra Boom-de-ay,” first sung in a British music hall by Lottie Collins in 1892. “Oom-pah-pah” fully captures the essence of this technique.

The prudence of using a diegetic number to open the second act when the previous act ended on such a cliffhanger is questionable, though “Oom-Pah-Pah” is an unquestionably entertaining song and the liveliness of the music-hall atmosphere helps to recapture the audience’s attention following the intermission. A more relevant scene set in Magistrate Fang’s courtroom may have fit in better with the dramatic arc of the story, but it is doubtful that it would have proved half as entertaining. Furthermore, since the second half of the show will focus heavily on Nancy, it is important that Bart open Act II with a song that features her prominently. Thus, Oliver’s story must temporarily be put on hold.

Bart wastes no time between the opening to Act II and the next number, however, as Bill Sikes, who has been spoken of sporadically throughout the show, is finally introduced and sings his only song, “My Name.” Sikes’s introduction is one of the most difficult aspects in the storyline of Oliver!, and delaying this introduction until the second act creates several complications for Bart. Given the revisions made to Fagin’s character, it is clear the old man is not the villain of this musical—Fagin is far less despicable than Bumble, Corney, or even Noah. Whereas these characters all abuse and mistreat Oliver, Fagin is genuinely kind to him throughout the musical. However, Bumble and Mrs. Corney both disappear for a great

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5 “Oom-Pah-Pah” is not the only example of this technique to be found in Oliver! In Gammond’s compilation text, he includes a song “Tiddle Um Pom” which contains onomatopoeic lyrics that are very similar to those used by Fagin in his music-hall style reprise of “Pick a Pocket or Two” (the reprise is actually called “Rum Tum Tum” on the soundtrack to the Palladium revival of Oliver!)
length of time following Oliver’s journey to London—Noah and the Sowerberries disappear entirely. Thus, Act I proceeds to its conclusion without any real sense of conflict. The momentum of the story lies in the lively depiction of the thieves and the almost countless stream of songs that define this liveliness. Act II must raise the stakes and initiate some sort of tension to drive the rest of the show, but introducing Sikes so late in the story makes this difficult. Whereas Bumble, Corney, and the Sowerberries are too foolish and comical to be regarded as serious threats to Oliver’s hopes and happiness, Sikes poses a definite danger. Indeed, he is so dangerous that it is difficult to place him in the larger scheme of the story. Had the character been introduced earlier, it might have been possible to incorporate him more fully into the thematic breakdown of the show, highlighting how the housebreaker himself is in desperate need of love, but how he fails to properly go about attaining it in his abusive relationship with Nancy (Carol Reed would successfully explore this issue in the film adaptation of *Oliver!*). By introducing Sikes so late, Bart largely confines the character to the role of a brute. It is a role that he fills admirably, but the threat posed by him is never fully articulated, especially in relation to Oliver.

Of course, Sikes functions mainly as a henchman in the original novel. He lacks the same level of conniving malice as Fagin and Monks, both of whom are more conspiratorial in their villainy. Unlike these two characters, who slyly plot against Oliver in hopes of corrupting him, Sikes’s menace is almost entirely physical in nature—he never truly conspires against Oliver, but instead frightens him with threats of violence. Sikes’s most remembered role in the novel is as the murderer of Nancy, another sign that his brute physicality is his defining trait.
Even this element of his character is complicated by the musical. In the original novel, Sikes is manipulated into killing Nancy by Fagin, who wishes to see the girl die. In the musical, the paternal and likeable Fagin introduced in Act I would never allow for such a thing to happen. Since Fagin is such a benevolent character in the musical, Sikes must fully take on the role of villain though he must do so squarely in his capacity as a physical creature. Because the character is introduced so late in the play, it is impossible to add any true depth to his characterization. As one early West End reviewer noted in the *Times* “all we know of Bill Sykes is that everyone is afraid of him and that Nancy loves him desperately” (“Hotchpotch” 16). This is all that we need know in order for the play to move forward, however.

Though Sikes has been spoken of (and sung of) several times before his introduction in Act II, there is no real sense of how dangerous he is until he sings “My Name.” The intensity and discordance of this song, which stands out as an anomaly when compared to virtually every other number in the play, helps to convey an air of imminent danger about the housebreaker. The content of the song is also traceable back to the novel. During Sikes’s introduction, he lays stress on the importance of his name while discussing the matter with Fagin:

“Hush! hush! Mr. Sikes,” said the Jew, trembling; “don’t speak so loud!”

“All of your mistering,” replied the ruffian; “you always mean mischief when you come to that. You know my name: out with it! I shan’t disgrace it when the time comes.”

“Well, well, then—Bill Sikes,” said the Jew, with abject humility. (95)

The lyrics are very straightforward for the most part; Sikes catalogues several of his crimes, all of which were quite violent, and proudly boasts of his notoriety within the underworld. The cowering bar patrons reinforce his claims without having to say one word on the matter.
Sikes’s introduction immediately helps to raise the stakes of the musical, though at this point there is no real sense of how Sikes may or may not affect Oliver’s chances for finding happiness. Act I featured a fundamentally joyful story about the orphan’s journey from loneliness and misery to companionship and happiness; furthermore, the antagonistic characters presented in the first act were humorous as opposed to dangerous. The revelation of Sikes sets up what will be a darker and far more complicated second act in which Oliver’s search for love produces dangerous consequences.

If establishing Sikes’s dangerous and volatile nature is an important function of this number, it is equally important to establish the tenor of his relationship with Nancy. No allusions are made to Nancy in the song, but the blocking of the number features Sikes displaying his violent possessiveness of the girl, as well as his failure to fill her emotional needs. The musical score contains several blocking notes meant to reinforce this point:

“Nancy rushes to Sikes’s side and cuddles him. Sikes ignores her….Nancy begins to flirt with one of the other customers. Sikes sees Nancy flirting with the customer, pulls her away, and knocks the man out” (91). The original prompt book blocks the scene out somewhat differently. In this blocking, when a drunken patron begins flirting with Nancy during the number and makes the mistake of putting his hands on her, Sikes grabs him by the lapel and punches him (57). Nancy rests her head on his chest and he puts his arm around her. Both stagings of the song establish that Sikes and Nancy are in a physical relationship, and likewise, that Sikes is a violent, controlling person. Nevertheless, his unwillingness to acknowledge Nancy’s love for him in the blocking listed in the musical score seems a central trait of the character, particularly in regards to the character of Nancy herself. Bart’s

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6 Oliver’s absence from the entire first scene of the musical’s second act is troubling, though he endures an even longer absence in Dickens’s original novel and the reader comes close to forgetting about him entirely until the revelation of his true identity toward the very end of the text.
assertion that Oliver! is all about the search for love makes Nancy’s hopeless desire to find love with Sikes all the more compelling. The slightly more tender Sikes described in the prompt book, however, fits in even more closely with this theme, as Bill clearly has some sense of affection for Nancy though he is only capable of expressing it through violence.

The necessity of consolidating the story becomes clearer as the scene progresses. The Dodger arrives at the Three Cripples and reveals information regarding Oliver’s arrest, trial, exoneration, and subsequent journey to Mr. Brownlow’s house. The plot exposition here is a necessary evil and it is well-placed in the opening moments of the second act—that way, the rest of the act can proceed without such encumbrances. Nevertheless, Bart violates what Allen Cohen and Steven Rosenhaus call a “golden rule” of writing for musical theater: “Musical theatre has traditionally been not only more of an auditory genre but also more of a visual genre, more of a spectacle, than straight theatre. With its emphasis on movement and song rather than on dialogue, the musical seems to require that the audience see and hear scenes and actions for itself, rather than hear them described….Thus a golden rule of musical theatre writing is: Don’t tell them, show them” (Cohen and Rosenhaus’ emphases, 29-30).

While it may not have been possible to include scenes depicting Magistrate Fang’s courtroom and Oliver’s arrival at Mr. Brownlow’s house, Bart might have utilized a more creative method for revealing Oliver’s fate than simply relying on the Dodger’s summarizing. It is a particularly striking weakness given that Oliver’s situation was so precarious in the final moments of Act I. A brief spoken summary of what has happened to him makes for a disappointing anti-climax. This is the weakest moment in the structure of the show, but it is entirely forgivable given the sheer breadth of the story that Bart is trying to tell in a two-hour period.
The scene proceeds with Fagin and Sikes recruiting a reluctant Nancy to help get Oliver back. Nancy’s reasons for not wishing to do so are self-serving, as in the original novel: she does not want to risk her identity being revealed to the police. The girl has not yet become selfless enough to put Oliver’s needs before her own, though she will make that transition shortly. When she refuses to cooperate with Sikes, he strikes her, and she is left alone onstage to sing her main ballad, “As Long As He Needs Me.”

It is somewhat ironic that “As Long As He Needs Me” enjoyed success as a pop song recorded by Shirley Bassey and has likewise proved a favorite of many Broadway leading ladies in various revue concerts given that the context of the number is so important to understanding it. It is very much Nancy’s song, perhaps to an even greater degree than the degree to which “Where is Love?” is Oliver’s song. The description of her relationship with Sikes in this number is true to the depiction of this relationship in the original novel, as Nancy seems desperate to convince herself that the housebreaker truly loves her. In the original text, this situation is perhaps best epitomized in Chapter XXXIX, in which Nancy tends to the ill Sikes:

Illness had not improved Mr. Sikes’s temper; for, as the girl raised him up and led him to a chair, he muttered various curses on her awkwardness, and struck her.

“Whining are you?” said Sikes. “Come! Don’t stand sniveling there. If you can’t do anything better than that, cut off altogether. D’ye hear me?”

“I hear you,” replied the girl, turning her face aside, and forcing a laugh. “What fancy have you got in your head now?”

“Oh! you’ve thought better of it, have you?” growled Sikes, marking the tear which trembled in her eye. “All the better for you, you have.”

“Why, you don’t mean to say, you’d be hard upon me to-night, Bill,” said the girl, laying her hand upon his shoulder.

“No!” cried Mr. Sikes. “Why not?”
“Such a number of nights,” said the girl, with a touch of woman’s tenderness, which communicated something like sweetness of tone, even to her voice: “such a number of nights as I’ve been patient with you, nursing and caring for you, as if you had been a child: and this the first that I’ve seen you like yourself; you wouldn’t have served me as you did just now, if you’d thought of that, would you? Come, come; say you wouldn’t.” (307-308)

Sikes’s abuse of Nancy as she tries to care for him is the ultimate indicator that he is wholly incapable of providing her with the love that she requires. Nevertheless, she continues to cling to him. The situation is immediately evocative of countless real-life examples of women in abusive relationships who have convinced themselves that their abusive boyfriends truly love them.

The relationship between the characters is used for thematic purposes by Dickens as well, for the author highlights how Nancy’s brutal nurturing in the underworld has left her open to such a relationship—a distinct contrast to Oliver whose ethereally good nature transcends the moral squalor of his environment. Nancy’s status as a prostitute is also of great significance here, for her living a life of the flesh leaves her even more open to the abusiveness of Sikes. The housebreaker’s continued mistreatment of Nancy’s body is internalized by the girl, as her internal life is so thoroughly governed by her external life to begin with. It is thus easy for Nancy to detest herself, and in so doing, to continue on as Sikes’s mistress in spite of all the abuse to which he subjects her. Robert R. Garnett notes that in this context, Nancy serves as a foil for Rose Maylie, Dickens’s representative of the feminine ideal (504-505). Whereas Rose is gentle, calm, and linked to the spiritual plane, Nancy is violent, physical, and linked to the carnal world of the flesh. When Rose later tries to convince Nancy to escape the miserable life she has known for so long, she refers to the girl’s “terrible infatuation,” (327), a fitting description of her extremely unhealthy relationship with the housebreaker.
Dickens ultimately connects Nancy’s prostituting of herself and Sikes’s abuse to one overarching tendency toward self-destruction which ultimately seals her fate. Neither Rose nor Mr. Brownlow can persuade Nancy to give up her former lifestyle, or to leave Sikes, though Nancy seems fully aware of the fact that doing both might allow her to attain redemption. Garnett writes that toward the end of the novel, when Nancy tries to plead with Sikes to spare her just before her death, there is an added dimension to her pleas in that she finally seems determined to try and break with the life she has known—a life governed almost entirely by crime and sexuality: “She pleads for freedom—freedom from her carnal life; freedom from Bill himself….Hoping that Sikes will renounce his brutish existence for a life of abstinence and prayer is not only futile, however, but even paradoxical, for he is the embodiment of matter devoid of soul; without his brutishness, Sikes would not exist at all” (506). Ultimately, it is far too late for Nancy to try and escape Sikes and the lifestyle that he represents. Gambling on the housebreaker’s sense of mercy is the equivalent of committing suicide. Sikes, like Nancy, is incapable of escaping the brutality of the environment in which he has matured.

The situation is complicated in the musical by the fact that the lifestyle Nancy leads is never depicted as particularly unhappy, save for when Sikes himself enters the scene. Nancy would hardly be capable of singing a song entitled “It’s A Fine Life” in Act I if she were the utterly degraded, alcoholic, self-loathing creature presented in Dickens’s original novel. Furthermore, the issues regarding her prostituting herself remain unexplored in the musical, and rightly so. Such issues would be wildly out of place in a play that is geared largely toward family audiences, and the overwhelmingly positive portrayal of the thieves’ den would be undercut significantly. Bart is willing to explore the abuse that Nancy must endure
as a result of her lifestyle, but it is her relationship with Sikes, as opposed to any other element of this lifestyle, that is truly destructive in the adaptation. Moreover, Bart never implies that this relationship is solely the result of the low-class upbringings of the two characters. The sentiments expressed in “As Long As He Needs Me” would be the same even if Nancy and Sikes were a middle-class couple locked in a similarly abusive relationship. The fact that the song is written in a pop idiom also seems to indicate that the troubles that Nancy must endure are not attributable to her time period either; rather, her abusive relationship with Sikes and her willingness to excuse his behavior are problems that transcend the period and setting of the musical. There is something universal about her desire to be loved, and simultaneously, something fundamentally modern about the situation she describes.

Sikes’s toxic influence is thus detectable in the shift in Nancy’s use of music. Whereas all of her previous numbers are light and happy music-hall songs, “As Long As He Needs Me” is a passionate pop ballad about the abuses she has endured, and likewise, her willingness to go on enduring them: “Who else would/love him/still? When they’ve been/used so/ill. He knows I/always/will. As long as/he needs me” (94). Nancy also reveals that her relationship with Sikes involves her having to stifle her own feelings toward him: “I miss him/so much/when he is/gone./But when he’s/near me/I don’t let on./The way I/feel inside/The love I/have to/hide. The hell! I’ve/got my/pride. As long as/he needs me” (94-95). Nancy’s search for love with Sikes is thus doubly futile; not only does he refuse to acknowledge her love in the way that she wishes him to, but she is simultaneously incapable of displaying the full extent of her feelings for him as a result of his brutish behavior. In spite of their physical relationship, Nancy is astonishingly repressed from an emotional point of view.
Even if the introduction of Sikes is somewhat rushed and the exposition of his relationship with Nancy is not fully developed, Bart is able to clarify the basic tone of their connection simply through the lyrics to “As Long As He Needs Me.” This number also helps to set up a great deal of what will follow. In a sense, “As Long As He Needs Me” is a direct follow-up to “Where is Love?” in that both songs focus on the singer’s need for companionship; moreover, both of these numbers diverge from the music-hall tenor of most of the other songs. If Oliver’s song is about the search for a mother figure, and Nancy’s song is about the search for someone whom she can love, then it stands to reason that the characters should gravitate toward one another. It is not surprising that the latter part of Act II will focus primarily on Nancy’s relationship with Oliver, for toward the climax of this act, Nancy will finally find in Oliver an outlet for the love that she has been forced to stifle as a result of her relationship with Bill. Unfortunately, this discovery will come at a very high cost.

The second scene of Act II returns Oliver to the forefront of the musical, though he is just one of many characters who participate in the next big production number, “Who Will Buy?” Before this song commences, Mrs. Bedwin is introduced singing a brief reprise of “Where is Love?” Tellingly, the number cuts off upon her singing the line “Where is/she?” (98), and Oliver awakens and embraces her, as if the question has already been answered. For certain, the compassionate Mrs. Bedwin proves a loving mother figure for Oliver. Even more significant, however, is the fact that Oliver is now in the household where the true identity of his mother will eventually be revealed. Given that Mrs. Bedwin is established as having been a servant in the Brownlow household for many years, it is more than likely that she attended on Agnes in the same way that she tends to Oliver. It would therefore be more accurate to label her a grandmotherly figure as opposed to a true maternal substitute. The
role that Nancy plays in shaping Oliver’s fate toward the end of this act will ultimately set her up as Agnes’s true successor.

“Who Will Buy?” does not match the music-hall roots of most of the other songs in *Oliver!* though the Englishness of the number is presented in other ways: the street vendors who sing out to sell their wares are again reminiscent of Bart’s early immersion in working-class English culture. Indeed, street singing was a familiar element of this culture from the Victorian era onward, though the characters doing the singing in *Oliver!* are not street performers, but merchants. Nevertheless, Bart depicts a London street that is alive with song, much as he did earlier with “Consider Yourself.” “Who Will Buy?” is also analogous to “Consider Yourself” in its focus on working-class Londoners who use music as a means of expressing themselves.

In spite of these similarities, however, there are also distinct differences between the two numbers. “Consider Yourself” is sung primarily by the Dodger. As a pickpocket, the Dodger is a person from the very bottom rung of the social ladder—below even the working-class merchants who sing in the chorus of both songs. Furthermore, “Consider Yourself” presents a communal vision of London as the Dodger insists that everything is share and share alike. The vision of London presented in “Who Will Buy?” is more individualist and capitalistic—the very idea of asking “who will buy?” implies that there must be a financial transaction of some kind. Whereas “Consider Yourself” repeatedly addresses the idea of trying to avoid making payments, whether it is by finding somebody to “foot the bill” or being “handy with a rolling pin” when the landlord comes calling, “Who Will Buy?” implies that making such payments is essential to the function of society. It is give and take as opposed to share and share alike.
Oliver himself, now living in upper-middle-class comfort with Mr. Brownlow, has already begun to subscribe to this new point of view as he joins in singing the chorus to the song, and later sings a reprise while on his way to return Mr. Brownlow’s books. The idea that Oliver must “buy” this wonderful morning as opposed to simply being able to enjoy it for free places the middle-class comforts of his new environment in contrast to the lower-class joys of the thieves’ kitchen. Though there are very few luxuries in the thieves’ den, there is still laughter, camaraderie, food, drink, and shelter, and notably, no one is charged for it. Fagin and the boys subsist together on the boys’ pickings, and (as the Dodger points out during “Consider Yourself”) even though there isn’t much to spare, the group shares everything and makes certain that there is enough to go around. While Brownlow’s house is certainly a more comfortable environment for the hero, all of these comforts are the result of Mr. Brownlow’s wealth—thus, the answer to Oliver’s question of “who will buy?” seems fairly obvious. Had Oliver never met Mr. Brownlow, it would have been impossible for him to derive any enjoyment from the song, for he would not have had any means of buying this beautiful morning. As in Dickens’ novel, Oliver’s happy ending is dependent on the charity of others, and moreover, on a series of fortunate coincidences.

In the original text, Oliver’s understanding of the commercial nature of the middle-class lifestyle is made evident when he asks Mr. Brownlow to hire him as a servant: “Don’t turn me out of doors to wander in the streets again. Let me stay here, and be a servant. Don’t send me back to the wretched place I came from. Have mercy upon a poor boy, sir!” (104). In the same scene, when Mr. Brownlow asks Oliver if he would like to be a writer, Oliver replies that it would be better to be a bookseller, again displaying a capitalist mentality. While “Who Will Buy?” does not feature Oliver trying to “sell” himself to Mr. Brownlow, it
does emphasize two of the defining traits of Oliver’s new environment: first, that you can’t
get something for nothing, and second, that individualism is a central element of the
commercial lifestyle. The musical structuring of “Who Will Buy?” is complex, with each of
the individual merchants singing about his or her wares. The voices ultimately become
layered, but there is never really a sense that they are all singing together—after all, each
person has his own goods to sell. Whereas “Consider Yourself” features everyone joining
together to sing about camaraderie in the face of economic hardship, “Who Will Buy?”
features a group of individuals, all of whom retain their own unique wares, identities, and
musical notes, trying to carve out a living through commerce and exchange. Oliver buys into
this new individualism as he expresses his desire to keep this lovely morning for himself:

Who will buy this
wonderful morning?
Such a sky you
never did see

Who will tie it
up with a ribbon, and
put it in a box for me?

So I could
see it at my
leisure whenever
things go wrong.

And I would
keep it as a treasure
to last my whole life long. (102-103)

Oliver’s desire to keep his treasure to himself is very different from the Dodger’s philosophy
as expressed in “Consider Yourself,” and moreover, from the philosophies presented in such
songs as “It’s A Fine Life,” “I’d Do Anything,” and even “Oom-Pah-Pah.” These songs all
focus on communal sharing of such things as food, drink, song, and happiness in general—
Oliver’s desire to keep the joys of “Who Will Buy?” to himself is contrary to the philosophy of the gang. This does not make Oliver any less sympathetic, though it does signify that his worldview has changed upon his becoming familiar with the comforts of the Brownlow household.

If Oliver’s new environment is more capitalistic and individualistic than the thieves’ den, it is likewise less lively from a musical point of view. Aside from Mrs. Bedwin’s reprise of “Where is Love?” no music is ever sung within Mr. Brownlow’s house save for Oliver’s chorus of “Who Will Buy?” Tellingly, Mr. Brownlow himself never sings, while Fagin, Oliver’s other protector/father-figure, is constantly using music to express himself and to entertain his pupils. Furthermore, there are no boys Oliver’s age in Mr. Brownlow’s house. Here, he is constantly interacting with adults who act like adults, as opposed to Fagin’s den where he is interacting with people his own age, or with an adult who is almost childlike in his exuberance and vivacity. The fact that Oliver lacks any friends his own age here further complicates the idea that this is the best environment for him. Kincaid’s points about the liveliness of the thieves’ den are thus underscored further by Bart’s staid portrayal of the middle-class household. This stifling bourgeoisie complacency is downright dull compared to the liveliness of Fagin’s den. Though Dickens ends his novel by insisting that Oliver lived out the rest of his days with Mr. Brownlow and the Maylies in perfect happiness, that happiness comes at the sacrifice of the conviviality of the thieves’ den, a fact which Bart highlights effectively through his eliminating music from the Brownlow scenes. The absence of song here is a troubling indicator that the exuberant elements of life in London are confined only to the underprivileged characters like Fagin, the Dodger and Nancy, who must

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7 One could argue that Fagin’s hoarding of his personal treasures runs contrary to the philosophy of the thieves’ den as well. This miserly component of Fagin’s personality is indeed a contrast to his more generous traits, though it does not prevent him from sharing other things with the boys and providing for their needs.
use music to keep their own spirits high in the face of adversity. Oliver’s life of calm and comfort will leave little room for song—furthermore, his new lifestyle makes any sort of companionship with the thieves impossible, as is made clear in the scene where he is rejected by his former companions.

The abduction scene marks a turning point in the portrayal of the thieves, who have, up until this moment, been depicted in a universally positive light. In this scene, however, the group turns on Oliver, and the cruelty shown toward the orphan is widely divergent from the kindness that he received from them in Act I. The portrayal of the Dodger here is especially unfavorable, as he mocks Oliver and turns over his possessions, including Mr. Brownlow’s books, the five pound note, and the very clothes on his back, to Fagin. The prompt book accentuates the young pickpocket’s newfound disregard for Oliver, and the two almost come to blows as a result of Dodger’s taunting: “Dodger picks up books & gives them to Fagin & goes to inspect Oliver’s clothes—laughing all the time…Dodger & Oliver have tug-of war over the Jacket. Dodger gives Oliver a push over to R. in front of Fagin to c. Oliver runs after Dodger. Fagin steps in front of Oliver and stops him” (70). Given that “Consider Yourself” is built firmly upon the possibility of Oliver’s finding friendship with the Dodger and the other pickpockets, the writing here seems uneven—in the first act, the Dodger is presented as a companion and role model of sorts for Oliver, whereas the second act portrays him as an antagonist.

Nevertheless, there is a solid basis for such a transition in the characterization of Oliver’s relationship with the thieves, and it relates back to the humorous depiction of the middle class in the earlier music-hall style songs sung in the thieves’ den. The Dodger and the other pickpockets find their fun in mocking the pretentiousness of the middle class. Upon
ascending to the urban gentry through his adoption by Mr. Brownlow, Oliver has become the very sort of person that the boys all love to hate: a well-dressed and respectable member of the upper orders. Though the Dodger and Oliver met on equal terms, Oliver’s ascent makes him an easy target for the boys’ derision and contempt. While the gang is very protective and friendly toward Oliver when he is part of their circle, the moment he steps outside their circle marks the end of the relationship: Oliver can no longer “consider himself” one of the family. It is of course ironic that Oliver’s ascent has left him unsuitable company for the thieves. Even more ironic is the fact that we are left to wonder whether this ascent has truly been worthwhile given all that Oliver has lost in the process. The friendship of the thieves’ den seems infinitely more alluring than the colorless comforts of Mr. Brownlow’s house. Furthermore, whereas the thieves are all musical, Mr. Brownlow remains mute. Even if the Dodger’s behavior complicates Bart’s positive vision of the lower classes to a certain extent, it never fully compromises this vision either. Whereas the novel features actual physical abuse toward Oliver on the part of Fagin in this scene, the only abuse Oliver is subjected to from his former companions is verbal.

All the same, the potential for physical abuse is established through the character of Sikes, who serves as a far greater threat to the child than any of his former companions. Whereas Sikes’s personal contempt for Oliver never reaches truly significant levels in the novel, Bart’s version of the character takes an instant disliking to the child and seems determined to punish him for his time spent with Mr. Brownlow, even though there is no proof that Oliver betrayed the gang. This instant dislike is necessary, as there is little time to set up a truly combative relationship between the two characters. More importantly, it is at this moment that Nancy first begins to take a truly active interest in Oliver’s safety and comfort. Though
she has treated him kindly in the past, inviting him to participate in the group’s songs and revels, she now steps into a genuinely maternal role in shielding him from danger, specifically, from Sikes’s wrath. The brief reprise of “It’s A Fine Life” that follows reveals the shift in Nancy’s loyalties from Sikes, Fagin, and the thieves to Oliver, as she is no longer fully convinced of the fact that this is the “fine, fine life” she described earlier. This shift happens rather abruptly, as in Dickens’s novel, and at times there is a sense that Nancy is more preoccupied with preserving the innocence and goodness that Oliver represents as opposed to focusing on the child himself. Nevertheless, the connection between the two characters is justifiable based on what they are both seeking. As mentioned, their respective solo numbers highlight the idea that there is a very strong connection between them.

Fagin’s own big solo number, “Reviewing the Situation” follows, though while “Where is Love?” and “As Long As He Needs Me” have a textual basis, with each number fully embodying the spirit of the characters as they were written by Dickens, this song is purely a creation for Bart’s version of the character. Dickens’s Fagin would never consider leaving the criminal underworld, for Dickens’s more sinister version of the character is firmly committed to this lifestyle. Though the reader learns virtually nothing of Fagin’s past, it is fairly evident that he has been a criminal for most of his life and that he delights in criminality. His pride in having never been “peached” on by his cohorts implies his fondness for his trade, and his romanticized view of the thieves’ den is an effective means of controlling his charges.

Conversely, Bart’s Fagin has severe misgivings about certain elements of the criminal lifestyle, most obviously, the violence that habitually goes along with it. In the same scene, he repeatedly pleads with Sikes not to resort to violence and tries to prevent his beating
Oliver and Nancy. It is implied in “Reviewing the Situation” that Fagin would gladly try a different way of living if possible, though all of the scenarios he outlines prove unfavorable.

While the patter rhythm used by Fagin in the singing of the verses to this song places the number in the music-hall context once more, perhaps the most striking element of this particular song is the Jewish melody incorporated into the number, particularly through the violin cadenzas that precede every verse. This Jewish element of the song actually serves to underscore the thematic significance of the number: Fagin would be willing to try living a different life, but the fact that he is a Jew would undoubtedly inhibit him from finding support or success in most of his endeavors due to the anti-Semitism of the society in which he lives:

So a job I’m getting possibly,

I wonder who the boss’ll be?

I wonder if he’ll take to me?

What bonuses he’ll make to me?

I’ll start at eight, and finish late, at normal rate and all, but wait!

I think I’d better think it out again. (117)

Here, the question of whether Fagin chose to become a criminal because he actually had no choice at all proves intriguing. While Fagin’s desire to avoid doing an honest day’s work may stem from nothing more than his own fondness for the underworld in which he has
thrived, an understandable desire given the liveliness and friendship inherent in this lifestyle, it is possible that the old man’s primary reasons for remaining a criminal, and perhaps, for having become a criminal in the first place, relate to his inability to find an honest job in what is a highly corrupt society that mistreats outsiders like himself and Oliver. Fagin’s conflicted desires, as expressed in “Reviewing the Situation,” reveal his lack of control over his own destiny:

I don’t
want nobody
hurt for me,

Or made to do the
dirt for me.

This rotten life is
not for me.

It’s getting far too
hot for me.

Don’t want no one to
rob for me,

But who will find a
job for me? (119)

The sympathetic portrayal of Fagin throughout the show becomes even clearer following “Reviewing the Situation.” Bart himself undoubtedly knew the difficulties of feeling like an outsider, because of both his Jewish roots and his homosexuality, and his willingness to present Fagin as a more agreeable character seems indicative of a certain connection between the composer and the lead character. Oliver is vulnerable and lonely due to his being an orphan; Nancy is vulnerable and lonely because of her masochistic love for Sikes; Fagin is vulnerable and lonely as a result of his Jewish background. Therefore, the desire of all three of the lead characters to find love in the face of adversity becomes more discernible.
In the next two scenes, Bart must hurry the show toward its conclusion. The Bumbles are briefly reintroduced so as to acknowledge the death of Old Sally and the revelation of the stolen locket. Subsequently, Mr. Brownlow deduces that Oliver is his grandson—in this version, as in the Lean film, Agnes is presented as Brownlow’s daughter. While the revelation of Oliver’s birthright here is unrealistically coincidental, it is far less outrageous than the original ending to the Dickens novel.

The musical does not truly reach its climax until Nancy arrives to speak with Brownlow about Oliver, however. This will set up the play’s eleven o’clock number, a reprise of “As Long As He Needs Me,” and the climax atop London Bridge. Nancy’s decision to visit Brownlow confirms that her loyalties have fully shifted, though this does not mean she is willing to betray Sikes. As in the novel, she refuses to do anything that will compromise her lover’s safety. While Nancy’s love for Oliver prompts her to try and redeem herself by returning him to Brownlow, her love for Sikes prevents her from choosing the most effective and safe way of doing so. Her attempt to reconcile these two very different kinds of love proves fatal, but the fact that she gives her life for Oliver is not surprising: her love for the orphan is a purer and more selfless love than her love for Sikes, which is tainted by carnality, abuse, and a lack of reciprocity.

The absence of any real threat to Oliver in the thieves’ den creates a lack of dramatic necessity that calls Nancy’s decision into question, however. In the original novel, Monks is still conspiring against Oliver when Nancy seeks out help from Agnes and Brownlow, and in other adaptations of the story, Oliver is in some kind of mortal danger from either Sikes or Fagin when Nancy tries to make contact with the middle-class characters in hopes of rescuing the orphan. Here, the only justification for Nancy’s decision is her fondness for the
child, and, as mentioned, this fondness does not emerge until toward the end of the play.

Fortunately, Bart’s skillful use of music allows for the justification of Nancy’s behavior. A brief yet strikingly effective reprise of “As Long As He Needs Me” is all that is needed:

As long as
he needs me.
I know where
I must be.
But will he ever
see that someone
else needs me?

As long as
life is long.
I’ll love him
right or wrong.
But he’s so
big and strong.\(^8\)
And someone
else needs me.

A child with
no one
to take his part
I’ll take his part, Bill
but cross my heart

I won’t betray
your trust
Tho’ people say
I must

I’ve got to
stay true just
as long as Bill
needs me. (124-125)

Oliver’s vulnerability and helplessness, along with his desire for love, have left an indelible mark on Nancy, and she is now determined that he shall find happiness at last. Nancy’s maternal role toward Oliver is fully realized, for she, like Agnes, is willing to sacrifice her

\(^8\) The somewhat banal lyrics here would be changed by Bart for the 1994 Palladium version: “But something/just as strong/says someone/else needs me.”
own life for the sake of the child. Just as Agnes died giving Oliver life, Nancy will die trying to ensure that Oliver has the chance to be with his grandfather. The fact that Agnes and Nancy are both “fallen” provides another link between them—in spite of their indiscretions, they both prove to be exceptionally loving mothers toward the neglected child.

Nancy’s death on London Bridge is by far the darkest moment in the musical, though the play has inevitably been building to this point. In spite of the sympathetic desire for love displayed by most of the characters, it seems impossible that Nancy should survive given her unhealthy love for Sikes. Nevertheless, her redemptive love for Oliver makes it clear that her death was not in vain, and moreover, that the search for love that has driven both characters is not hopeless.

Following Nancy’s death, the show proceeds to its conclusion—a conclusion modeled very heavily on the climax to Lean’s film. As in the movie adaptation, Sikes is shot by a policeman while trying to escape with Oliver. The rescued Oliver reunites with Mr. Brownlow and Mrs. Bedwin for his well-deserved “happily ever after,” though there is still a slight sense that he has lost something in his ascent to the middle class, even as he has gained a grandfather and loving protector. While Brownlow and Mrs. Bedwin will attempt to fill in the gaps that have always existed in Oliver’s life, “Where is Love?” expressed a need for a mother figure, and Oliver has just lost a second mother through Sikes’s murder of Nancy. Furthermore, Brownlow’s inability to sing seems to reflect an inability to experience the intense emotions and joys that propel Fagin, Nancy, and the other musical characters to burst into song. His middle-class existence is one of staid comfort as opposed to the more dynamic, passionate world of the thieves—a world that better exemplifies Oliver’s own strong passion for finding someone to love him.
Bart diverges heavily from both the Lean film and the novel with his conclusion. In the musical’s final scene, the Artful Dodger is caught and arrested by the Bow Street Runners, and the angry mob that storms Fagin’s den steals the old man’s trove of treasures. Fagin himself is spared the horrific fate of his textual counterpart, however, and manages to escape the mob. It is a just exoneration, for the adaptation’s version of the character is hardly the purely evil corrupter of children depicted by Dickens in the original story. The idea of ending the musical with Fagin being sent to the gallows is almost unthinkable. Just the same, Bart refuses to give the old man an unadulterated happy ending either, and rather, settles on a somewhat ambiguous conclusion. The arrest of the Artful Dodger, Fagin’s closest companion and friend, adds a touch of melancholy to the old man’s story—not to mention the story of the Dodger himself. The fact that Fagin has lost all of his companions and treasures means that he will truly have to start over. Nevertheless, Bart instills a good deal of hope into the conclusion as well: Fagin resolves to try turning over a new leaf and walks off into the sunrise, an optimistic indication that he still has a chance at a happy life, and perhaps, a chance to find love once more.

The ambiguity surrounding the play’s final moments seems fitting in the context of the darker and more complicated second act of the show, though it is not in keeping with the uninhibitedly lively tone of the first act. Thus, Bart includes a more unreservedly joyful conclusion with the finale/curtain call by incorporating a string of reprises of some of the show’s happiest songs sung by the entire cast. The creation of this finale was largely accidental. Roper notes that the ending to the show was changed following the Wimbledon run: “After the murder at London Bridge and the chase of Bill Sikes and his dog, Bart had written a scene back at the workhouse where the Artful Dodger is saved and brings him back
with his benefactor with a handful of gifts for the ragamuffins—a short scene with snatches of reprised songs in it. However, it proved mechanically impossible to strike London Bridge” (43). Thus, the reprises were incorporated into the curtain call itself. The fact that the Dodger’s liberation had to be excised from the script is disappointing given that the Dodger’s arrest following Sikes’s death incorporates yet another uncharacteristically dark moment into the joyful musical, especially considering that the Dodger, in spite of his flaws, remains a likeable character. Even so, some elements from the original finale remain in the sung-through curtain call. The very first song reprised is “Food, Glorious Food” and Oliver arrives with Brownlow to share a food basket with the workhouse orphans despite their mistreatment of him earlier in the show. Here, Oliver reveals that despite his new middle-class comfort, he will not turn his back on his lower-class roots—the reprise of “Consider Yourself,” which immediately follows, emphasizes that Oliver is capable of applying the Dodger’s share and share alike philosophy even though he has now ascended to the middle-class. Furthermore, Oliver has retained his own ability to use song as a means of expression despite having ascended into the silent world of Mr. Brownlow’s house.

The effect of this memorable adaptation of Dickens’s second novel on our cultural perceptions of the story is undeniable. Moreover, just as Oliver Twist is open to a myriad of interpretations, Oliver! presents many opportunities for analysis regarding the presentation of the Dickensian characters in a musical context. Perhaps the greatest triumph of Oliver! relates directly to the culture text of Oliver Twist; the fact that the show has resonated with so many people throughout the world has placed it at the forefront of Twist adaptations. The next chapter picks up with the show’s history, detailing the creation of the acclaimed film adaptation and the subsequent revivals of the show in both the United Kingdom and the
United States. The afterlife of *Oliver!* has only served to reinforce its dominance regarding the culture text of *Oliver Twist.*
Chapter 4
“Boy for Sale” – Oliver! From Stage to Screen to Stage

The film version of Oliver! (1968) is one of only a handful of film adaptations of a stage musical that has just as stellar a reputation as its theatrical source. Nevertheless, the film did not exert the same revolutionary effect on filmmaking that the stage show exerted on British theater; whereas the stage version of Oliver! marked a new chapter in the story of the British musical, the film version of Oliver! was produced toward the end of an important chapter in the story of Hollywood, namely, the heyday of the movie musical. Although Oliver! won the Oscar for Best Picture in 1969, it would be almost a full thirty-five years before another film musical would go on to win that same prestigious award. In spite of this, the importance of Sir Carol Reed’s Oliver! to the enduring power of Bart’s masterpiece cannot be denied.

Whereas Lionel Bart reconciled many different elements in the creation of Oliver!, harmoniously merging the conventions of the British music hall, the integrated book show, and the world of Charles Dickens together, the gestation of the film version of Oliver! was marked by conflict, specifically, conflict over the film rights to the stage musical, conflict over casting decisions, and conflict over the role that Bart would play in the production of the movie. For obvious reasons, Bart wished to exert a good deal of control regarding the film project; from early on, he engaged in hypothetical casting calls, and Roper notes that the well-meaning but overly assertive composer was often a bit too public in his throwing around names for the leading roles, a habit that irritated several of the people associated with the development of the project (116). Newspaper articles from the period reinforce this fact,
most notably, an article in a 1963 issue of the *Daily Mail* which states that Bart was already engaging in mock-casting well before pre-production on the film was underway:

The hit musical *Oliver!* is to be filmed with Peter O’Toole starring as Fagin…and, wait for it, the idea is for Elizabeth Taylor as Nancy and Richard Burton as Bill Sikes. Before you start shouting and arguing about the cast line-up, listen to Lionel Bart who wrote the show which is a success in Britain and on Broadway. It’s his plan anyway. He said last night, “we’ve been offered a couple of million dollars (about £714,000) for the film rights of *Oliver!* but I think now we’ll set up our own company and produce it ourselves.” (Lewin, par. 1)

The information presented in this article is striking for two reasons: first, it reveals Bart’s desire to maintain a significant level of creative control over the project. Secondly, as any fan of the film will undoubtedly recognize, none of the hypothetical casting decisions listed in the article actually reached fruition. Bart threw out Peter O’Toole’s name far too prematurely, and neither Richard Burton nor Elizabeth Taylor was cast in the film. Despite the fact that his overzealous early casting decisions were imprudent, and in many ways impractical, Bart continued to haphazardly drop names to the press: Peter Sellers, Danny Kaye, and even Laurence Olivier were all on the composer’s list of potential Fagins, though Sellers eventually emerged as his top pick for the role. Surprisingly, the issue of Sellers playing Fagin would prove to be one of the most controversial elements regarding the film version of *Oliver!*, though this controversy was related to a larger controversy regarding Bart’s influence over the production of the film.

Bart’s protectiveness of his magnum opus was understandable. In an interview with Barry Norman of the *Daily Mail*, he unequivocally restated his commitment to preserving the integrity of his show: “There’s the question of artistic control which I insist on retaining” (par. 6). Unfortunately, the composer would soon discover that the idea of translating
Oliver! from stage to screen was hardly as simple as creating a hypothetical list of actors to play the lead parts.

The central contention over the production of a film version of Oliver! related to a contractual agreement that Bart had made with Donmar very early in the creation of his musical. When Bart initially entered into his contract with Albery in 1959, a clause in the agreement with Donmar stated that the company would exert a certain amount of control regarding Bart’s distribution of the film rights to Oliver! A writ served by Donmar against Bart on May 21, 1964 elucidates the issues that precipitated the conflict:

It was provided (inter alia) by Clause 11 of the 1959 Agreement that in the event of the Defendant Bart receiving a bona fide offer to purchase the Rights he should immediately notify the Plaintiffs of such offer and if such offer should be unacceptable to the Plaintiffs they should be entitled within ten days from the date of such notification to submit to the Defendant Bart either a better bona fide counteroffer to purchase the Rights by a third party or themselves to offer to purchase the Rights on the terms of the original offer and the Defendant Bart should be bound to accept any such counteroffer or offer submitted or made by the Plaintiffs. (2)

Thus, Donmar had veto power over Bart’s choice regarding the rights to a film adaptation of Oliver!—if Donmar, within a ten day period, discovered a more favorable counteroffer to whatever proposal Bart had found, the composer would have to accept this new deal as binding.

Brookfield Productions Ltd. (a company that was backed by Columbia Pictures), eventually made Bart an offer of $400,000 for the film rights, and Bart was eager to accept, primarily because the studio heads were willing to guarantee Sellers for the role of Fagin—obviously, the inclusion of a major international star like Sellers would have assured the marketability of the film to audiences in both the United Kingdom and the United States. Furthermore, Bart had wanted Sellers to play Fagin from the very beginning, going all the way back to Oliver!’s West End debut. Roper writes that Sellers was one of several
prominent actors that Bart actively pursued to play Fagin before the show had even premiered in 1960 (40).

Bart’s faith in the Brookfield deal may have been misplaced; it was eventually revealed that “Brookfield was nothing more than a private company which had never produced any film” (Roper 117). Even with Columbia backing them, the Brookfield offer seemed precarious, for despite the promise that Sellers would play Fagin, “there was no guarantee that he would be available and so Columbia’s guarantee was worthless” (“The Copyright in ‘Oliver’[sic]” E17). Sellers had recently suffered a massive heart attack, and the precarious state of his health seemed an impediment to Brookfield’s being able to guarantee his involvement. Nevertheless, Bart was determined to pursue the deal.

Much to Bart’s vexation, Donmar took advantage of their veto option and countered with an offer from Romulus Films, a production company operated by Sir John and James Woolf. Not only were the Woolfs willing to offer more money, but Romulus seemed a more legitimate film company having produced several acclaimed motion pictures already. Consequently, Donmar presented Bart with their counteroffer, as specified in the writ they filed: “In pursuance of the said agreement dated 13th May 1964 and the 1959 Agreement the Plaintiffs on behalf of Romulus duly submitted to the Defendant Bart by a letter dated 13th May 1964 and addressed to both Montpelier and the Defendant Bart a bona fide counteroffer which was better than the said offer by Brookfield” (5). Astonishingly, Bart was unwilling to admit that this new offer was the “better” of the two deals, despite the fact that it would have meant more money for him personally than the Brookfield agreement. Instead of accepting Donmar’s proposal, he stubbornly pursued the Brookfield contract.
It is both fitting and somehow ironic that the situation made its way to the High Court of Chancery. Given the convoluted court documents filed by the various parties, there are moments when the papers associated with the case read something like the various documents in the Jarndyce and Jarndyce lawsuit of *Bleak House* fame. The stakes of the case were high, however, and Bart was determined to have his way. In his view, since Romulus could not guarantee Sellers, their counteroffer had failed to meet the criteria set forth in the Donmar contract.

Donmar and Romulus both found Bart’s objections unreasonable. While the idea of what constituted a “better” offer was open to some interpretation, basing such an interpretation solely on the criteria of who would be cast in the film’s lead role seemed almost absurd. However, while Romulus was willing to pursue Sellers for the role of Fagin, Sellers himself was less open to that possibility. The actor swore out an affidavit of his own stating that he would only be willing to play Fagin if Brookfield produced the film—yet another affidavit filed by Jules Buck of Montpelier revealed why: Sellers was a part owner in the company and thus had a larger stake in the matter regarding which company would eventually gain the lucrative film rights to the musical (10). Of course, this only strengthened Bart’s resolve to close the deal with Brookfield, and he continued to dig his feet into the ground. Both Buck and Eric John Bryan of Brookfield subsequently swore out affidavits in hopes of convincing the judge to side with Bart, stressing that since Romulus would be unable to deliver Sellers, their counteroffer did not meet the contractual agreement between Bart and Donmar. Like Albery, John Woolf “dismissed the claim as nonsense and argued that they could cast whomever they wanted for any of the roles, so long as they matched the monetary bid” (Bright 206). While the question of whether or not guaranteeing Sellers affected the
understanding of what constituted a “better” offer was a central sticking point in the conflict between Bart and Romulus, this issue was actually just one facet of a far larger debate regarding the role that Bart would play in the development of the film.

In his affidavit, Buck asserted that “to the best of my knowledge, information and belief Romulus have had no discussions with Mr. Bart about the style or character of the film, and to the best of my information and belief they have not in fact given it any consideration at all” (10). For Buck, and clearly, for Bart himself, this was yet another illustration of the fact that the Romulus offer was not a “better” offer in spite of its larger financial guarantee. Roper speculates that Bart’s resistance to the Romulus deal, despite the fact that it ultimately would guarantee him more money, had more to do with these issues of creative control than with anything else: “The higher offer meant he was being bought out” (118). It was perhaps the inevitable result of Bart’s earlier indiscretions regarding the prospect of making the film, for while Brookfield seemed willing to acquiesce to the composer’s wishes, Romulus was determined to do things their own way. The larger offer was, in some ways, a payoff: Bart would back down and allow the company to exert fundamental creative control over the film project. Bart refused to drop the matter, however, and continued to assert that so long as Brookfield could guarantee Sellers for Fagin, their offer was the more favorable of the two proposals.

The issue was settled fairly quickly, as the court, like Donmar and Romulus, dismissed Bart’s claim and passed an injunction preventing him from distributing the film rights to Brookfield. Bart thus lost any real influence over the film, and creative control was turned over to John Woolf and his production team. Though Columbia Pictures still produced the movie, it was released by Romulus rather than Brookfield. Bart was understandably
disappointed with the court decision and the loss of his creative vision for the film version of *Oliver!*, a vision that was built largely around the idea of Sellers in the role of Fagin. Nevertheless, the positive end results of the film that was produced in the wake of such confusion and contention are undeniable, as *Oliver!* has withstood the test of time and remains a beloved movie musical up through the present day. Given the fact that Bart’s influence over the project was limited, Carol Reed himself was the man most responsible for the success of the motion picture version of *Oliver!*

In many ways, Reed was the perfect choice to direct this film. His father, Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree, the noted actor and theater manager, had played the role of Fagin on the London stage in the famous J. Cormyns Carr adaptation of *Oliver Twist* in 1904. According to Nicholas Wapshott, “Fagin became one of Tree’s best-loved roles and the production, planned for just one night, lasted a year” (33). One might go so far as to argue that *Oliver Twist* was in Reed’s blood. Unsurprisingly, Reed had been interested in *Oliver!* since the play had premiered in 1960—that same year, the director had tried to purchase the film rights himself, though the asking price was too high (Wapshott 318).

In 1967, when *Oliver!* was finally ready for transition to the big screen, Reed was no longer viewed as being at the height of his filmmaking powers; his last few films had been neither critical nor commercial successes. He was therefore not the first choice of producers for the role of director. British filmmaker Lewis Gilbert, who had recently directed the Michael Caine classic *Alfie* and the James Bond blockbuster *You Only Live Twice*, was originally signed to direct the film (Bright 206). When Gilbert was unable to fulfill his commitments as director because of a contractual obligation to Paramount, Woolf signed Reed to take over in spite of some resistance from executives at Columbia. Despite his
recent setbacks, several of Reed’s personal and professional qualities made him an appropriate candidate for directing *Oliver!*, not the least of which was his cultural background. As an Englishman, Woolf undoubtedly understood the importance of preserving the British elements of the source, much as Bart himself had worked to maintain the Englishness of Dickens in his original stage treatment even while working in an American genre. Whereas an American director operating in the American form of the integrated film musical might have been tempted to fully Americanize Bart’s adaptation, moving it away from both its Dickensian and music-hall roots, a British director would undoubtedly be more careful about preserving the Englishness of the work. Robert Moss writes that “as an English director stewarding a new version of an English classic, to be filmed on English soil, Reed would presumably feel a special affinity for the property” (249). Peter William Evans fully echoes this statement, claiming that “[Reed’s] Britishness was also considered an important factor for a film carved out of a novel by one of the most quintessential of British icons, Charles Dickens” (160). Aside from the obvious appeal of his cultural background, the executives at Romulus were also interested in Reed’s track record as a director who had made several films featuring young people in the central roles.

Some of Reed’s previous successes, including *A Kid for Two Farthings* and *The Fallen Idol*, involved several child performers, and Reed had already displayed a “sensitive handling of child actors” (Evans 160). Given that *Oliver!* would obviously involve a good number of child actors in both the leading and supporting roles, “Reed’s acknowledged ability for coaxing superb performances from children” (Wapshott 319) was a significant issue in his being put at the helm of *Oliver!* Woolf would later write that his primary reason for turning to Carol Reed was the fact that he had made a “marvelous film…with the little boy, *The
Fallen Idol” (qtd. in Bright 206). Reed himself commented on the pleasures and perils of working with child actors in the souvenir book published for the film’s release:

I enjoy working with children. Of course it can be tedious but it can also be exhilarating. The trick is to try to start off every scene with the child. That way the little boy gets his lines over first, and the adult actors in the scene relax knowing that the boy isn’t going to spoil the scene for them. Another trick is to do a child’s scene over as many times as you need to without pausing in between takes. I just keep the camera running and gently tell the child that he’s doing fine but just do it once more. It is very important too that children do not get nervous, they must think of filming as a game. Therefore you must never let them see that you are worried or that tension is gathering. It is also important for your relationship with the child to be exactly right, not too friendly because then he will take advantage of you, but not too formal because in that case he will be afraid of you. No it’s not easy directing children but when it works out it’s a film director’s most gratifying moment. (34)

Clearly, Reed understood that the dynamic between a director and a child actor was fundamentally different from the dynamic between a director and an adult actor, and given that Oliver! featured dozens of children in the chorus, not to mention two relatively inexperienced boys in the leading roles of Oliver and the Artful Dodger, Reed’s talent for working well with young actors was clearly an important factor in the decision to appoint him as the film’s director.

Putting all of these important traits aside, perhaps the most fundamental quality that made Reed the ideal choice for directing Oliver! was his personality. The forever patient Reed was able to cope with the innumerable stresses of directing a major musical motion picture better than most directors. According to Morris Bright:

Carol Reed’s direction inspired both actors and crew alike. He was never heard to raise his voice in anger and would at the beginning of shooting each morning sit down with the cast involved in the scenes for that day. He talked through the action, reminding them of the scene which immediately preceded the one they were to film—which might have been recorded some time before. This especially put the young actors at ease and made for a happy filming environment. (206)

Oliver! was a large-scale film from the very beginning and it would have been an
intimidating project for any director to tackle. For Reed, the chief pressure was the result of inexperience—he had never directed a musical before. Equally intimidating was the scope of the project. Like Lionel Bart before him, Reed was operating within several important contexts even while working primarily from one distinctive source, that is, Bart’s stage play. Oliver! would have to fit in with the traditions of the 1960s film musical, and simultaneously, correlate with the tradition of big-screen adaptations of Oliver Twist if it was to live up to people’s expectations. Of course, the film history of Oliver Twist had already helped to shape the stage version of Oliver!; Bart had acknowledged his play’s debt to the David Lean film several times. Reed himself shared a good-natured rivalry with Lean throughout his career, as both men were regarded as two of the finest British directors in the history of the cinema. Nevertheless, Reed had to consider the fact that the 1948 Lean film was still etched in the memory of the public. The popular understanding of Oliver Twist was now stretched between two very different adaptations: Lean’s film and Bart’s musical. In a sense, Reed managed to reconcile these two adaptations by creating a motion picture version of Bart’s play, though the success of this version was largely the result of his own creativity.

Translating the musical to the screen meant that one of the most critically acclaimed elements of the stage production would be lost, namely, Sean Kenny’s set. Kenny’s brilliant revolving construction was designed for the stage, not the screen, and Oliver! was not going to be filmed on a theater stage, but rather, on a soundstage at one of Britain’s greatest movie studios: Shepperton. John Box’s production design for the film may not have had the revolutionary effect of Kenny’s set, but the visual splendor of the movie adaptation stood out nevertheless. Box would later share the Academy Award for Best Art Direction with Terence Marsh, Vernon Dixon, and Ken Muggleston, each of whom contributed heavily to
the film’s visual appeal. Indeed, the streets of Dickensian London are brought to life in a way that both matches and contradicts Lean’s vision from the 1948 film: while there is the same level of attention to detail, the overall image is far brighter, happier, and more imaginative than the bleak, Cruikshankian visualizations of the Lean adaptation. The world in which the characters interact looks as though it has been lifted from a beautiful picture book (or, perhaps more accurately, a popup book). Though there are realistic looking street-corners, merchant tables, and shop-windows as far as they eye can see, there are also merry-go-rounds, an elevated locomotive circling overhead, and of course, a thieves’ den that is set up more like an artist’s studio or music-hall stage than a criminal hideout. The imagination that went into the look of *Oliver!* perfectly matches the imaginative spirit behind the musical itself. British singer and radio star Sir Harry Secombe, who played the role of Mr. Bumble, felt from the beginning that the film was going to be something special if for no other reason than its visual splendor: “It was apparent from the very first day on the set at Shepperton Studios that we were working on a winner. The money being spent on the project was tangible. To wander round the outdoor set was to be taken back in time. The recreation of early Victorian London was authentic down to the tiniest detail. There were even real loaves of bread in the baker’s shop windows” (qtd. in Bright 206). Even with all of the elaborations permitted by working in a film studio as opposed to a theater, the set design for *Oliver!* reflects some of its theatrical roots, particularly in the thieves’ den setting. Crossbeams, rafters, dilapidated staircases, and wooden platforms are all central to the design of this particular element of the set, and Fagin’s den, with its multiple levels and ramshackle frame, seems a sort of visual tribute to Kenny’s original plan for how to create the world of *Oliver Twist* onstage. Only a few short years later, pieces of the *Oliver!* set would be reused at
Shepperton for another Dickensian musical adaptation: Leslie Bricusse’s *Scrooge*. A full twenty-five years later, the studio would once again play host to the filming of a Dickensian musical: *The Muppet Christmas Carol*.

Before proceeding into an analysis of the film, it is important to consider the issue of casting, for some of Reed and Woolf’s casting decisions are directly responsible for the longevity of the motion picture. Most obvious is the casting of Ron Moody as Fagin. In this matter, audiences will continue to owe a great debt to Woolf and Reed for decades to come, for by casting Moody in this part, they managed to preserve on film one of the truly great stage performances in the history of the musical genre. This is the same reason why the film versions of *The Music Man* and *Fiddler on the Roof* are so successful, and simultaneously, so important from an archival point of view; Robert Preston’s Harold Hill and Topol’s Tevye are definitive performances of the stage roles, and thankfully, these performances remain immortalized on film. Carol Reed reportedly fought hard to get Moody cast in the part despite pressures from studio executives to try and hire Sellers for the role. Though Sellers had made it clear that he would only consider playing the part if Brookfield was producing the film, time had passed since the controversial lawsuit and the prospect of recruiting Sellers was enticing to the studio executives as his name value was still unquestionable. Furthermore, the controversial lawsuit had already generated a great deal of publicity surrounding the possibility of his taking on the role in the film version—some news outlets mistakenly asserted that Sellers was already under contract for the film.¹ In spite of all the hype that had already been generated regarding the possibility of Sellers taking the part, Reed was convinced that Moody was the ideal choice to play Fagin. Wapshott writes that “Reed

¹ An article in a May 1966 issue of the *London Times* mistakenly reported that the film version of *Oliver!* in development would star “Peter Sellers as Fagin” (16).
was captivated by both the actor himself and his singing voice. As he prepared for the film, he repeatedly played the soundtrack of the stage production, challenging those in his family and close friends, including his children, to deny that Moody was indeed an exceptional performer” (320). Ultimately, Reed and Woolf succeeded in getting Moody cast in the part.²

Moody dominates the film in the same way that he dominated the West End stage, though the Fagin presented on film is even more complex, rich, energetic, and loveable than his stage counterpart. Understandably, the Jewish elements that the actor incorporated into his original West End portrayal are toned down, as is necessitated by the medium of film—aside from the obvious controversy that such a depiction would have created, an over-the-top stage performance would have come out poorly onscreen. Moody himself commented on the different approaches he took when performing the role, pointing out that the overtly Jewish Fagin he had presented on stage would not have worked under the “sharp eye” of the motion picture camera which picks up every element of a performance in far greater detail than the eyes of an audience member ever could. In Dickens and Film, A.L. Zambrano reprints an interview in which the actor contrasted his stage version of Fagin with the film version:

I played it very Jewish on the stage, but we changed it for the film. My stage Fagin caused no uproar at all, but I didn’t think he was right for the film and Sir Carol Reed, the director, agreed. He’s not terribly Kosher now.

It is a touchy subject; mention Fagin and a lot of people erupt.

That was then and this is now. Attitudes have changed. I play him kind of mockingly because I think it’s healthy for us to realize that what was once anti-Semitic is now best handled by a light approach. Sort of saying to people “isn’t it rather amusing that things were once this way but now they’ve changed, Thank God.”

² There seems to be some question as to whether or not it was Reed or Woolf who fought for Moody being cast in the role. Several of the Reed biographies insist that the director championed Moody in the part, while a book on the history of Shepperton studios claims that Woolf had already signed Moody before Reed was given the job of directing (83). The souvenir program released to promote the film implies that Reed was named as the director before casting took place, and it is thus likely that Reed played a significant role in getting Moody cast in the part.
Fagin is a man who never fitted into his time, who had no place in society. We’re all more human now and it pleases me to humanize Fagin and make him comical. (qtd. in Zambrano 333)

Some critics have suggested that the film version of Fagin is far more analogous to Clive Revill’s interpretation of the character, and even the lyric booklet included in the special edition copy of the Broadway soundtrack claims that “Moody’s film portrayal of Fagin would be much closer to Revill’s than to his own stage version” (12). This is taking the matter a bit too far, for while Moody does not utilize the same mannerisms and vocal patterns that he did onstage, a slightly Yiddish inflection is still preserved in many of the songs. More importantly, Moody’s distinctive, schizophrenic vivacity is still very much intact. Perhaps even more significant is the gravitas that he incorporates into the performance, and Reed is to be commended for bringing out new facets of the character even as Fagin was being performed by a veteran like Moody.

There is a powerful moment in the film where Oliver, who is about to go to sleep in the thieves’ den for the first time, is helped into bed by Fagin. Fagin assists the boy with taking off his shoes and the two exchange a sympathetic glance, as Fagin himself becomes even more aware of the boy’s innocence and inherent goodness. Moody then delivers Fagin’s line about Oliver going on to become “the greatest man of all time” if he continues as he has started. In the novel and stage play, this line is delivered sardonically, as Fagin is already trying to convert Oliver to the criminal way of life. In the film, however, Moody’s delivery is marked by his gentle inflection and genuine sincerity, as if he foresees that there is something special about the child who, in the end, will make the journey from rags to riches. Fagin proceeds to sing Oliver to sleep by gently reprising the chorus from “Pick a Pocket or Two.” Moody himself commented on the poignancy of the scene in a retrospective special
on the making of the film: “There’s one moment where he sings a lullaby to Oliver…and Oliver looks up at him like that…and it’s what they call rachmanis, pity. Look at these kids, these poor little waifs. At least I’ve given them a home. They’re not up the chimneys or down the mines. They’re warm, they’re comfortable, they’re smoking fags and pipes. What more could a boy want?” Moody clearly understood that this Fagin, perhaps even more than the stage version of the character that he had created several years earlier, had a genuine sense of paternal care for his young charges.

This is not to say that the film version of Fagin lacks any kind of malice or danger. The moment Oliver is asleep, Fagin heads off to do business with the merciless Sikes, and in the very next scene set in the thieves’ den, the old man threatens the boy when he catches him spying. Nevertheless, the connection between Oliver and Fagin, which can be revealed very clearly on film due to Reed’s ability to utilize close-up shots, emphasizes the central theme of love even more openly than in Bart’s stage play—in the film, we can truly accept Bart’s insistence that Fagin too, in his relationship with the Artful Dodger, Oliver, and the rest of the boys, desires to be loved. As Moss puts it, “Moody’s rendering leaves the old man’s feloniousness, cunning, and unction intact, adding as well a colourful, roguish quality….Under Reed’s expert supervision, Moody consistently maintains a perfect harmony among the various traits of his characterization” (250). The greatness and diversity of Carol Reed’s Oliver! is due in no small measure to the greatness and diversity of Ron Moody’s Fagin as presented on screen.

Whereas Moody reprised the stage role that he had made famous, Georgia Brown was not cast as Nancy. Reed had been interested in trying to get Shirley Bassey for the part, but the producers, worried about the controversy that might be stirred up in late-1960s America as a
result of Sikes’s beating a black woman to death onscreen, rejected this option (Wapshott 321). Instead, newcomer Shani Wallis, who had worked on the stage mainly in cabarets and revues, took over the part. Wallis had been seen performing on the Ed Sullivan Show by the filmmakers and had left a definite impression with her powerful singing voice.³ Initially, the production team was somewhat worried that the clean-cut actress might not be able to capture the essence of the more earthy and low-class character that they wanted her to portray. Specifically, they were unsure that she was capable of doing a Cockney accent. In a recent episode of the British television series After They Were Famous which focused exclusively on the cast of Oliver!, Wallis proudly asserted her Cockney credentials which proved essential to her eventually attaining the part of Nancy.

Another neophyte was Jack Wild, then only fourteen, whose screen credits mainly consisted of appearances on several television shows. Wild had been discovered only a few years earlier playing football in the park with his brothers, and he had since participated in the stage version of Oliver! before starting work on the film. The young actor initially played in the chorus as one of Fagin’s boys, and gradually worked his way up to the slightly more prominent role of Charley Bates. His performance as the Artful Dodger in the film version thus marked a culmination of sorts. It is rather difficult to believe that Wild was so new to acting in films given the confidence he was able to exude in his portrayal of the Dodger—his performance nabbed him a well-earned Oscar nomination for Best Supporting Actor, and he remains one of the youngest performers ever nominated for the award. In the After They Were Famous special, Wild reflected that the physical similarities between himself and the Artful Dodger (as the character was described by Dickens), along with

³ Wallis had recently appeared in the Broadway show A Time for Singing, which closed after only 41 performances; she performed a number from this particular show on Sullivan.
certain similarities in their personalities, played a significant part in his landing the role of the streetwise pickpocket: “[Dickens’s] description of me…it was a turned up nose, big eyes, very self-confident and streetwise and all that, so, in so many ways, I suppose I was almost playing myself.” Sadly, Wild passed away in 2006 at the age of 53, having spent years battling alcoholism, and then, oral cancer, which robbed him of his voice. Nevertheless, in virtually every interview he gave in the decades following his performance as the Dodger, even those conducted after he had lost his vocal cords, Wild presented nothing but fond recollections and happy memories of his work on the motion picture.

Rounding out the central cast was Carol Reed’s nephew Oliver Reed, who landed the role of the villainous Bill Sikes, and Harry Secombe, who played the part of Mr. Bumble. In spite of what many might assume, Wapshott writes that Reed’s casting of his nephew was “far from nepotistic” (321) as Carol had tried to dissuade Oliver from pursuing acting—it was ultimately John Woolf who formally suggested Oliver for the part (Wapshott 322). Oliver clearly enjoyed working with his uncle, and in subsequent interviews he spoke highly of his experience shooting the film. In 1988, at a twentieth anniversary celebration of the movie’s release, the incessantly entertaining yet always controversial actor delighted the audience with anecdotes regarding his high jinks with Butch, the bull terrier that played Sikes’s canine companion, Bullseye. These anecdotes, be they fact or fiction, are worthy of the irrepressible movie star, who is remembered today more for his off-screen antics than his onscreen talents—a true shame given the caliber of performances he was capable of giving. At his funeral in 1999, the song “Consider Yourself” was sung by the mourners (“Final Toast to Oliver Reed,” par. 3). As for Harry Secombe, he had already gained a good deal of experience playing parts in Dickensian musicals having originated the role of plucky Mr.
Pickwick in the Leslie Bricusse/Cyril Ornadel show *Pickwick* (1963), an adaptation that had been heavily influenced by Lionel Bart’s masterpiece (see Chapter 5). Secombe, whose charitable and kindhearted personality matched Mr. Pickwick’s character far more than it matched the personality of the disagreeable Mr. Bumble, seemed an unlikely choice for the parish beadle. In fact, Secombe’s gentle and congenial nature, so at odds with the character he was playing, led to his being the target of a humorous prank. During the number “Oliver!”, Bumble is supposed to lead Oliver off to see the parish board by tugging at his ear:

Secombe tugged gingerly at the boy’s lobe, not wanting to hurt him. Reed called cut and pulled Secombe over to one corner: “No, no, Harry,” he said, “you really must seize hold of the ear as roughly as you can.” Secombe protested that the boy was such a little lad. “Never mind that,” Reed insisted, “do it harder next time.” Harry Secombe recounts what happened next: “We waited until the cameras and lights were ready for another take, and off we went again. When we got to the same piece of action, I really put everything I had into grabbing Mark’s ear. To my horror it came way in my hand. The prop man had fitted a false plastic ear on the boy. I had been set up.” (Bright 209)

Secombe brought more to the film than just his genial personality and good humor; he also brought his beautiful, operatic tenor voice, which was known to audiences throughout England.

But what of the titular hero? Though over two-thousand young actors tried out for the part, it was eight-year-old Mark Lester who ultimately won the role. Lester came from a show business background; both of his parents were performers, and he had a few credits to his name before beginning work on the role that would make him a child star. His performance in the *Lord of the Flies*-esque Jack Clayton film *Our Mother’s House* the previous year had received good reviews, and helped to win him a spot in the final auditions for the role of Oliver. Ultimately, he received the part. In a retrospective interview played during the Boxing Day television special *Celebrate Oliver!* (2005), Lester looked back on the experience of making *Oliver!* with good-humored self-deprecation: “I don’t know why Carol
Reed chose me as Oliver. I mean, I couldn’t sing, I couldn’t dance, acting…I don’t know. I guess I must have just looked the part.” It is a fair assumption, given the fact that Lester had been a child model in the years leading up to Oliver!, and for certain, a great deal of the actor’s performance is based around his physical appearance. The young Lester’s almost angelic facial features repeatedly create a strong impression in the viewer as well as the characters, much as Dickens intended given the importance of Oliver’s appearance to the unraveling of the mystery surrounding his birthright. Lester’s singing voice was dubbed in the film, and the unearthly pitch of the replacement voice adds to the ethereal depiction of the character. Nevertheless, even if he lacks the earthy dynamism of Moody’s Fagin, Wild’s Dodger, and Wallis’s Nancy, Lester manages to evoke the most important sentiments associated with the original character: sympathy and compassion. In many ways, Lester’s performance is an amalgamation of the earlier film versions of the character as he presents the vulnerability and haunted nature of Lean’s vision of Oliver, while simultaneously conveying the charm and cuteness of the American versions.

Reed deserves a great deal of credit for assembling such a uniformly excellent cast for his film. He deserves even more credit for his creative yet practical approach to adapting Oliver! for the medium of film. Successful movie versions of stage musicals negotiate the boundaries between the stage and screen by creatively modifying the source material so that it will come across more effectively on film. Less successful adaptations fall into the trap of simply transferring the work from one medium to the other without displaying any insight

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4 Reed used several clever tricks to elicit the proper reactions from the young Lester on screen. In the scene where Fagin is poring over his treasures and Oliver stares at the old man, fascinated by what he sees, Reed popped a white rabbit out from his coat pocket for Lester to stare at while the scene was being filmed. The child’s face immediately lit up, “and the shot was achieved” (Wapshott 325). In Celebrate Oliver!, Lester reveals that for the “Where is Love?” sequence, during which Oliver cries while thinking of the mother that he never knew, the director brought sliced onions down into the cellar set so that crying would come fairly naturally.
into what one can accomplish on film that one cannot accomplish onstage (and vice versa). All of the changes that Reed made to the source in adapting it for film are fitting in the context of the medium in which he was working, and he succeeded in creating a highly entertaining and cinematic motion picture based on Bart’s musical as opposed to simply creating a filmed version of a stage show.

As mentioned, the basic vision of Oliver’s story, and likewise, of Dickensian London in the film version of Oliver! is heavily stylized. The fact that the film is a musical undoubtedly shapes Reed’s approach; this is a London where policemen gallop in rhythm, and butchers and fishmongers sing in harmony. Moss astutely comments on this technique in his text: “The inherent artificiality of the musical form makes it the wrong medium for extreme realism, grim social critiques, or philosophical commentary. The songs and production numbers automatically distance us from the real world and make the characters’ problems a matter of artifice. Understandably, Reed keeps the energy level of his show as high as he can, but never allows more than an engagingly sympathetic form of reality to break through” (252-253). It should be noted, however, that the opening scenes of the film (which are not set in London) contain a surprising amount of stark brutality and melancholy. While the sequences which take place in the workhouse, and later, in Mr. Sowerberry’s shop, may not contain the “grim social critiques, or philosophical commentary” that Moss writes of, Reed’s film emphasizes the darkness of the original novel more overtly than the Bart musical, and the first half hour of the film lays especial emphasis on Oliver’s loneliness, degradation, and misery. Gone are the amusing comedy numbers “I Shall Scream” and “That’s Your Funeral”; Reed wisely excises these songs, not because they are less memorable than the later numbers, but rather, because they would detract from the depressing portrait of Oliver’s
life that he is trying to paint in the film’s early scenes. While they help to move the stage show forward by injecting energy into the early workhouse scenes and setting the comic subplot of Bumble’s courtship of Mrs. Corney in motion, the story being presented in the early scenes of the film musical would be hurt by such an energy. The disheartening and largely unmusical world of the workhouse, as presented in the film, will later be contrasted with the vibrantly stylized musical world of London.

Reed pushes Oliver to the very depths of despair in the film’s opening sequences, thus returning the story to its melancholy roots. By restoring the scene in which the boys draw lots to determine who will ask for more, Reed reduces Oliver’s autonomy, but the sacrifice is necessary given the fatalistic depiction of the workhouse scenes. The presentation of Oliver’s vulnerability, loneliness, and misery from the moment he draws the long straw is wrenching: during the song “Oliver!”, the other workhouse orphans take just as much satisfaction in Oliver’s punishment as the Bumbles; during “Boy For Sale,” as Bumble walks the streets of London trying to sell Oliver to various tradesmen, two cruel children pelt the orphan with snowballs; at Mr. Sowerberry’s, the cold undertaker is given the narrator’s memorable line about trying to get enough work out of Oliver without putting too much food into him. Reed then includes a scene of Oliver in his new job as an undertaker’s mute, underscoring the bleak procession with a melancholy reprise of the melody to “Boy for Sale”—once again, Oliver is taunted by the workhouse orphans during the sequence. Finally, Reed reverses the order of the scenes just before Oliver sings “Where is Love?”: the orphan is mocked by Noah and abused by Mrs. Sowerberry and Mr. Bumble before he sings the

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5 The shots of Oliver being led through the snow by Bumble further the melancholy imagery of the opening scenes, though they also lead to one of the biggest bloopers in the film. The opening scenes suggest that it is winter time, but when Oliver arrives in London, it is clearly summer…though he has only been walking for “seven days.”
song. This is a particularly effective revision, as there has been a true emotional climax. Thus, “Where is Love?” caps off a countless number of humiliations and miseries that Oliver has been forced to endure, and the emotion behind the song resonates strongly as a result.

Had Reed included “That’s Your Funeral” or “I Shall Scream” in these early scenes, not only would he have taken the focus off Oliver, but he likewise would have lightened the oppressively dismal tone of this first section of the film. The coherence of Reed’s tragic vision here helps to set the tone of Oliver’s early life, and this unyieldingly bleak sequence is the perfect cinematic setup for the contrasts that will follow.

As in the original stage play, the liveliness, camaraderie, and spectacle of London stands in contrast to the earlier scenes set in the workhouse, though the dichotomy is even more pronounced in the film given the emphasis that Reed places on the sheer misery of Oliver’s existence before his journey to London. Throughout “Consider Yourself,” Reed takes advantage of the freedoms bestowed upon him by the medium of film. Whereas the stage version can only imply the scope of London, the film can actually track Oliver and the Dodger as they move across the enormous soundstage and meet dozens and dozens of extras, all of whom serve to accentuate the size and diversity of the Victorian populous. The visual picture in and of itself is awe-inspiring, and, as in the original musical, the result is a newfound appreciation of community that contradicts the fractured loneliness of Oliver’s early life.

Reed again makes use of the ability of a filmmaker to incorporate multiple settings into a motion picture by resetting the next big choral number, “It’s A Fine Life.” Instead of having Nancy and Bet go to Fagin’s den and visit the boys, Fagin goes to the Three Cripples to see Sikes. This revision adds more diversity to the film—whereas the stage play must mount
four numbers in a row in Fagin’s den, Reed is able to transition to a different setting and incorporate an entirely different group of characters into the chorus. In the film, Nancy sings the song, not with Fagin’s boys, but rather, with the group of barflies, prostitutes, and scoundrels who occupy the saloon. This revision accentuates the conviviality of the underworld, and thus expands the scope of the criminal community beyond Fagin and his pupils. Once again, the viewer must consider that although Oliver’s life with the criminal class is neither luxurious nor honest, this collection of individuals seems happier and livelier than virtually any other group of characters.

In the same scene, Reed takes advantage of the opportunity to introduce Sikes, illustrating one of the fundamental improvements made to the source. By shifting the action from Fagin’s den to the Three Cripples much earlier, Reed is able to establish Sikes’s role far sooner than Bart. In the film, a brief scene in which Sikes turns over his stolen booty to Fagin is beautifully underscored by the melody to “My Name,” which is not actually sung in the film. The tradeoff here is understandable; whereas Bart’s Sikes, who is not introduced until the second act, must make a dramatic entrance and sing an intense song so as to quickly establish himself, Reed’s Sikes, introduced far earlier, can operate at a more leisurely pace, which in turn allows for more gradual character development. Furthermore, by not having Sikes sing, Reed manages to set him in contrast to the other thieves and scoundrels, all of whom express themselves through music. Sikes is fundamentally a loner, even amongst his fellow thieves, as is established by his sitting alone during the singing of “It’s A Fine Life.” It is partially for this reason that his relationship with Nancy proves so destructive for the both of them.
Here it is worth mentioning Oliver Reed’s performance as Sikes. Throughout his entire first scene, Sikes does not say a word, yet Reed manages to convey a great deal of the character simply through his daunting physicality and intense facial expressions. Notably, Sikes completely ignores Nancy during her singing of “It’s A Fine Life,” and thus her final verse of the song in which she pines for the creation of a “happy home/happy husband, happy wife” is particularly moving, as the person she is singing about has already been presented onscreen and demonstrated that he takes her for granted. Nevertheless, Sikes is not inhuman—during the song, he feeds Bullseye from his own bowl of stew, and as he leaves the Three Cripples with Nancy, he allows her to walk beside him. Whereas the Sikes in the original musical must be presented solely in his capacity as a brute, due in large part to the fact that he is introduced so late in the play and thus must serve as an eleventh-hour antagonist, Reed is able to convey to the audience that Sikes truly has feelings for Nancy but is incapable of expressing them properly.

These new dimensions to Sikes are perhaps best presented in a scene written exclusively for the motion picture which depicts Sikes and Nancy interacting in their flat. As Sikes tries to sleep, Nancy noisily cooks him breakfast in a saucepan. Annoyed, he orders her to go and see Fagin and procure the money that the old man owes him. Before she leaves, she asks if he loves her, and the frustrated Sikes angrily exclaims: “Oh, `course I do, I live with you, don’t I?!” There is genuine conviction in his voice, but he never actually tells her that he loves her. Here it is almost possible to pity Sikes for his inability to properly express his feelings—he is clearly unaware of just how lucky he is that Nancy loves and takes care of him. Unfortunately, as the film progresses and Nancy’s loyalties shift from Sikes to Oliver, the housebreaker becomes increasingly more violent toward her and any sympathy that one
might have for the character is lost. Nevertheless, Sikes consistently seems burdened by the way he treats her. In John Glavin’s book of essays on Dickensian films, John Romano states that he found Robert Newton, the actor who portrayed Sikes in Lean’s 1948 classic “wooden compared to Oliver Reed, the Sikes in Carol Reed’s musical version, who always carries, from the beginning, this anxiety” (13). Oliver Reed’s conflicted portrayal of Sikes stands out as a uniquely multifaceted interpretation of a largely one-dimensional Dickensian character, and both of the Reeds deserve a good deal of credit for this depiction—the tragedy of the Nancy/Sikes relationship is heightened by the added depth given to the housebreaker.

Reed also adds significant depth to the relationship between Nancy and Oliver, though credit for this element of the film must also go to Shani Wallis and Mark Lester who have a palpable chemistry in their respective roles. In the film, when the other boys in Fagin’s gang taunt Oliver for his good manners, Nancy immediately takes his side and defends him. Whereas the stage version of “I’d Do Anything” is built around the Dodger’s interactions with Nancy and Oliver’s interactions with Bet, the film version focuses primarily on the Nancy/Oliver relationship, and Reed repeatedly incorporates shots of the two simply exchanging glances, thus heightening the connection between the characters. By accentuating Nancy’s maternal devotion to Oliver from early on, Reed is able to make her character even more sympathetic—thus, her death scene toward the end of the movie is all the more devastating.

Following Oliver’s arrest, Reed again utilizes multiple settings, returning to the Three Cripples for a brief scene between the criminals (lifted largely from the libretto), and then, incorporating a scene set in Magistrate Fang’s courtroom (written specifically for the film). The latter is a particularly useful addition to the movie, as it eliminates the need for having
the Dodger simply summarize Oliver’s arrest, trial, exoneration, and journey home with Brownlow. Thanks to the freedom of the film medium, Reed can actually show all of these occurrences instead of relying on plot exposition.6 Furthermore, by having Nancy go to the courtroom to watch the proceedings, Reed manages to flesh out Nancy’s devotion to Oliver even more clearly. She witnesses the child’s testimony firsthand and sees that he has no intention of “peaching” on Fagin’s gang—consequently, her desire to see Oliver content and safe seems perfectly natural.

In subsequent scenes, Nancy’s loyalty to Oliver is reinforced. Whereas her refusal to help get Oliver back from Brownlow in the stage play is based only on her desire to keep herself safe, the film makes it clear that she is adamant about preserving Oliver’s chance for happiness as she pleads with Sikes on the orphan’s behalf: “Why can’t you leave the boy alone? He won’t do you no harm. Why can’t you leave him where he is, where he’ll have the chance of a decent life?” Bart’s show focuses on Nancy’s determination to make Oliver part of a community as she gets him to join in the group’s songs and games, but Reed is able to take the matter further, fully emphasizing the idea that Nancy is a surrogate mother figure for Oliver. Like Oliver’s mother, she makes great sacrifices and endures much pain so as to protect and preserve the child she loves. Furthermore, just as Oliver lost his real mother, he is doomed to lose Nancy as well.

As the film builds toward its climax, it strays further from Bart’s play. “Oom-pah-pah,” which is used to open the second act in the original musical, is pushed off until toward the very end of the film. The purpose of the song is also changed completely; whereas Nancy simply sings the song as a diegetic performance in the original play, here she uses the

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6 The depiction of Magistrate Fang (referred to in the credits simply as “The Magistrate”) in the film is in keeping with the light tenor of the London scenes. Whereas the novel’s Fang is cruel and brutal, Hugh Griffith’s portrayal is largely comical.
number to create a diversion so that she can sneak Oliver out of the tavern and over to London Bridge where Brownlow is waiting. The result is that the number becomes infinitely more suspenseful and integral to the plot of the film, and the fact that it is such a lighthearted and cheery number adds a brilliant level of paradox to the heavy tone of the scene. After fleeing the Three Cripples, Nancy and Oliver make for London Bridge—unbeknownst to either, they are being pursued by an infuriated Sikes. Brownlow is seen waiting near the top of the stairs to the bridge and Nancy points Oliver toward his guardian. Oliver turns to run to Brownlow but pauses and turns back to Nancy, embracing her tightly in gratitude for her loving care. However, his hesitation proves fatal, for as he turns again to leave, Sikes appears out of nowhere and grabs them both, pulling them behind the staircase. Sikes proceeds to bludgeon Nancy in front of Oliver, and though the murder is not shown onscreen, Oliver’s terrified reactions make the sequence just as gruesome as if we were witnessing the murder firsthand. This horrifyingly suspenseful scene underscores the theme of Nancy’s self-sacrificing devotion to Oliver, a devotion so strong that she gives up her life for him; even the novel does not reach such a level of poignancy in the depiction of Nancy’s affection for Oliver, for her sacrifices are made purely for the sake of capturing Monks and restoring Oliver to his proper birthright—a somewhat anti-climactic issue given that Oliver has already been reunited with Mr. Brownlow and will thus be safe and sound no matter what happens regarding his inheritance. In the film, Nancy gives of herself to save Oliver’s very life, and the raised stakes presented in the adaptation serve to justify the extent of her sacrifice.

The final scenes of the film reinforce the influence that the David Lean adaptation had on Bart’s creative vision, though Reed takes the matter even further by having Sikes escape back to Fagin’s den with the hostage Oliver and shooting a few quick scenes inside the den
as the desperate Sikes interacts with a nervous Fagin. As in the Lean film, Sikes confronts the gang looking for money and protection before trying to escape with Oliver via the rooftops. The scene concludes in largely the same way as the Lean adaptation, with Sikes being shot by the police and Oliver being rescued. The final scenes featuring Fagin diverge significantly from both the stage play and the Lean film, however. While Fagin and the boys escape the den through a back exit, Fagin accidentally drops his treasure chest into a deep pool of mud and is unable to recover his prized possessions. Broke and alone, Fagin reprises “Reviewing the Situation” and prepares to face a new day as a reformed man, but while the play leaves the conclusion ambiguous, the film features a joyful reunion between Fagin and the Dodger who happily reprise another verse of “Reviewing the Situation” before skipping off merrily together while the sun rises in the foreground. This unambiguous and upbeat ending is perhaps the most significant alteration to the stage source, for while the added scenes are used mostly to flesh out Bart’s vision, the revised ending completely contradicts the conclusion that Bart created for his roguish characters. Nevertheless, the interactions between the two characters here highlight their fondness for one another, which is in keeping with the basic premise of the entire musical: the search for love. Fagin and the Dodger may be criminals, but they clearly care for one another, and, in a sense, each one is all that the other has in the world. Furthermore, they are the most engaging and entertaining characters in the musical, so much so that the audience can actually forgive them for returning to their thieving ways. Ron Moody would later comment in the *Celebrate Oliver!* special that the revised ending of the Reed film was his favorite moment in the movie. He would touchingly recreate the scene with Jack Wild for the *After They Were Famous* reunion program, a recreation that has become all the more poignant since Wild’s death.
As for Oliver’s happy ending, since the large-scale stage finale and sung-through curtain call from Bart’s original play would not work particularly well on screen, Reed keeps the final scene of the film very subtle and simply shows Oliver returning home with Mr. Brownlow and embracing Mrs. Bedwin while the main melody to “Where is Love?” is used to underscore the action. In the original screenplay, the script called for a large-scale reprise of “Consider Yourself” sung by the people of London following Oliver’s rescue. Reed’s decision to keep the finale subtle (and silent) reinforces the lack of music in the middle-class environment and thus highlights the musicality of Fagin’s world, especially given that Fagin and the Dodger are the last characters to sing in the adaptation.

Through his attention to detail and creativity, Carol Reed was not only able to create an excellent film adaptation of Lionel Bart’s *Oliver!*, but an excellent film, period. The prestigious awards bestowed upon the movie are a testament to Reed’s efforts. *Oliver!* went on to win five Oscars, including Best Picture, Best Director for Carol Reed, Best Art Direction, Best Score, and Best Sound. A special Oscar for Outstanding Choreography Achievement was given to Onna White for her brilliant staging of the film’s musical numbers at Shepperton. *Oliver!* also won the prestigious Golden Globe for Best Motion Picture (Musical/Comedy), and Ron Moody took home the award for Best Actor. While all of these awards serve to underscore the achievements of the film, debate remains over where the movie stands in comparison to the stage musical.

Although some ardent fans of Bart’s piece were disappointed with certain elements of the movie, other critics have asserted that the film version of *Oliver!* actually surpasses its source. Noted *New York Times* theater critic Frank Rich claimed that the “film, as directed by Carol Reed and choreographed by Onna White, is one of the rare Hollywood adaptations
to improve upon a stage musical” (11). Even more arresting is a lengthy article in the *New Yorker* by the notorious film critic, Pauline Kael. Kael, who had written markedly negative reviews of other 60s film musicals such as *West Side Story* and *The Sound of Music*, has nothing but good things to say about *Oliver!* in her article “The Concealed Art of Carol Reed.”

As the title indicates, Kael’s praise for the movie is largely directed toward the vision of Reed, who succeeded in creating an unpretentious and, in some ways, old-fashioned film in an era where most filmmakers were self-consciously focused on innovation: “Carol Reed is in the tradition of the older movie artists who conceal their art, and don’t try to dazzle us with breathtaking shots and razor-sharp cuts” (193). This issue of old-fashioned entertainment is an interesting one to consider given that *Oliver!* was produced even as the musical was on its way out as a popular genre. Evans, like Kael, notes that, “in retrospect *Oliver!* seems like an incongruous film for the times” (160). The end of the 1960s was about to give way to the cynicism of the 1970s. The fact that *Oliver!* found such success in an era that was becoming increasingly unmusical in both its cinematic preferences and overall demeanor highlights one of the most appealing qualities of Reed’s film: its escapism. For Kael and many others, *Oliver!* offered a brief excursion into a lighter and happier time in the history of the cinema when the movies that were being produced could entertain all different types of audiences without talking down to them: “There’s something restorative about a movie that is made for a mass audience and that respects that audience” (Kael 193). Perhaps the most striking moment in Kael’s review is a paragraph in which she compares the film version of *Oliver!* to the original stage show: “No one who sees this movie is likely to say, ‘But you should have seen *Oliver!* on the stage!’ On the stage it was the kind of undistinguished musical that
people took their children to dutifully. Though not on a level with The Sound of Music, it had that detestable kind of mediocre respectability; it was an English version of Broadway Americana, and I walked out on it” (193). The contrast between Kael’s reaction to the stage and film versions of Oliver! is striking, though the main reasons for her appreciation of the film reinforce the freedom given to Reed by the medium of the motion picture, and likewise, the creativity of the director in exploring the narrative possibilities granted to him by that medium.

In a sense, the film is more Dickensian than its stage source, for the large-scale portrayal of the London populace, along with the storybook-like artistry behind the settings and locations, immediately evoke the image of Dickens’s concept of London as presented in his fiction. As Kael puts it, “the stylization encourages us to notice the conventions of the story as we are enjoying the story. It seems to put quotation marks around everything Dickensian, yet not in a cloying way—rather, in a way that makes us more aware of some of the qualities of Dickens’s art” (193). While the artistry of the stage version of Oliver! is equally impressive, one admires the visual appeal of the stage show for different reasons: Kenny’s set is multi-functional and innovative, and there are very practical incentives to appreciate such a construction. The visual appeal of the story being told in the film version is more artistic than practical, and seems somehow more Dickensian perhaps due to the fact that it is less utilitarian.

Toward the end of her article, Kael compares Oliver! to the 1948 Lean adaptation. Though she praises the Lean version as a fine film, she ultimately concludes that the Reed film is “much easier to take…I don’t think the softening of this particular material is to be lamented. There were scenes in the David Lean film that were simply too painful, and the
trumpery of the Dickensian plotting was too stylized and conventional to go with the pain of the child’s suffering and the horrible murder of Nancy” (195). Kael does not truly assert that one of these two film adaptations of *Oliver Twist* is superior to the other—she simply elucidates her reactions to the two adaptations. Nevertheless, her comparisons between the unyieldingly dark film directed by Lean and the bright, lively musical directed by Reed can serve as a good starting point for one of the more controversial critical debates associated with *Oliver!*

Several critics of Reed’s film have condemned the adaptation for its revisions to Dickens’s novel, claiming that a dark story like *Oliver Twist* has no place in the musical genre. These are the same arguments that Bart faced when he was first writing *Oliver!*; the transformation of the musical into a high-profile motion picture simply allowed more critics to address the issue, for commentators who had not seen the stage show could now use the movie as the source for their criticism of the jollification of Dickens. Furthermore, the widespread popularity of the film, which stretched even further than the popularity of the original stage show, meant that *Oliver!* would exert a stronger influence on the culture text of *Oliver Twist* than ever before. In *Charles Dickens on the Screen*, Michael Pointer presents a particularly stinging criticism of *Oliver!*

For all its popularity and success, it was not a good Dickens film. The jollification of Dickens, long the cinema’s way of moderating the difficult parts of the stories, swamped the subject, and fundamental changes were made to nearly all the principal characters. Soft-faced Mark Lester was clearly the opposite of a workhouse boy. Apple-cheeked Jack Wild as the Artful Dodger had obviously never roughed it for years. Fat, jovial Harry Secombe was the antithesis of the oily Bumble, and Shani Wallis as Nancy looked more like the girl next door than an ill-used whore. The despicable Fagin was turned into a picaresque old rogue who was allowed to escape to further villainy, scampering off down the road at the end in a Chaplinesque image of which director Carol Reed should have been ashamed. (85)
Pointer’s criticisms here are limited to the issue of fidelity to the Dickensian source, and most of his complaints are sophomoric as he resorts to judging the characters by the appearances of the actors cast in the roles as opposed to truly analyzing the idea of *Oliver!* as an “adaptation” of the Dickens novel. Furthermore, Pointer’s condemnation of the jolly and loveable Fagin presented by Ron Moody seems to indicate that he had little or no familiarity with Bart’s original stage musical—why would he be so taken aback by this presentation of Fagin on film if he had seen the stage show, which maintains the same roguish portrayal of the character? Subsequent paragraphs in his book reinforce his lack of familiarity with the stage show, but also serve to reveal the source of his criticism toward Reed’s film: “Reed should also have been ashamed of the unacknowledged borrowing from David Lean’s *Oliver Twist* in story line and appearance. The similarities are too many to be coincidental. *Oliver!* is much closer to the David Lean film than to the Charles Dickens novel or Lionel Bart’s stage musical” (86). Pointer is an adamant supporter of Lean’s Dickensian adaptations, and thus his righteous indignation regarding Reed’s “borrowing” from the Lean film seems to be the main factor in his condemnation of *Oliver!* Nevertheless, this quote again reveals Pointer’s lack of familiarity with the show, for Bart himself had acknowledged that the Lean film played a significant role in his writing of *Oliver!* , and the similarities in the plot structures of the two works are the result of Lean’s shaping of the popular consciousness of the *Twist* story in his film. To say that Reed’s film is closer to the Lean film than to its stage

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7 It is worth noting that Pointer fails to mention Sikes while running down the presentation of all the other characters in the film. It seems that Pointer purposefully ignores Oliver Reed’s portrayal of Sikes in the musical because it would hurt his argument; as mentioned, Reed’s Sikes is a deep and vivid depiction of the character.

8 In his text, Pointer goes so far as to label David Lean’s version of *Great Expectations* (1945) as the finest film adaptation of Dickens ever produced.
source is absurd because the stage source itself was admittedly patterned on the Lean film in many respects.

In spite of these limitations, Pointer’s criticisms reveal one side of a critical debate regarding the legacy of *Oliver Twist* in other media. There are many critics who, like Pointer, condemn *Oliver!* due in part to their devotion to the Lean film. Lean himself (along with several people close to him) was apparently agitated by the similarities between his film and Reed’s adaptation of the Bart musical. Silverman makes many of the same points that Pointer does in his biography on Lean: “Though ostensibly based on the 1960 London stage musical by Lionel Bart, the movie version, which delivers Fagin as a lovable rogue and allows him to escape…is more of an uncredited adaptation of the Lean film in storyline and look than either the Dickens novel or the Bart stage show” (79). Silverman goes on to note that Lean found *Oliver!* “very difficult to talk about” (qtd. in Silverman 79), thus implying that he too felt as if Reed had stolen from his movie.

It is rather ridiculous that so many people seem to feel that Lean holds a monopoly on adaptations of *Oliver Twist* given that the Lean film was just one (albeit outstanding) adaptation in a long series of adaptations of the story. There are obviously numerous factors that contribute to this issue of Lean’s *Oliver Twist* vs. Reed’s *Oliver!*, several of which relate to the rivalry between the two filmmakers that existed throughout their careers. But is there any substance to the allegations that Reed copied the Lean film? As mentioned, the fact that Bart patterned the plot of his musical heavily on the *Twist* storyline as it was presented in the Lean adaptation complicates the issue and makes such criticisms seem pointless. However, there are certain shots and sequences incorporated into the film that do seem to borrow heavily from the Lean version. The incorporation of the workhouse board into the early
scenes of the film, and one particular shot of the boys looking in on the hypocritical board members as they indulge themselves with a huge feast, seems borrowed from the workhouse sequence in the Lean film. An even more obvious example is the rooftop climax where Sikes tries to escape the police while holding Oliver hostage. As mentioned, Lean’s revised ending is much more exciting than Dickens’s original treatment of Sikes’s flight because Oliver’s safety is still not assured, and Reed does indeed seem to be channeling Lean in his direction of the climactic chase that results in Sikes’s death. The final shots of the two films are also similar, as both adaptations end with Mrs. Bedwin embracing Oliver following his return to Mr. Brownlow’s house.

Interestingly, the screenplay indicates even more parallels between the two adaptations, as the Reed film was supposed to open with Oliver’s mother limping to the workhouse, giving birth to her son, and dying immediately after kissing him; this is the exact sequence of events with which Lean begins his adaptation. The scene was apparently filmed but cut from the final version of the picture, as two children’s books based on Oliver! feature photographic illustrations taken from the movie—one of these books contains stills from the scenes featuring Oliver’s mother and her journey to the workhouse. The issue of whether or not to depict Oliver’s mother in the opening scenes of the musical would come up yet again when Bart and Sam Mendes worked together to revise the show twenty-five years later.

As Pointer indicates, there are numerous similarities between the Lean film and Reed’s adaptation, and some of these similarities are probably not coincidental. However, the question of whether or not Reed should be condemned for “borrowing” from Lean’s film is far less important than the question of how these issues relate to the culture text of Oliver Twist. Contrary to what Pointer may believe, Lean’s adaptation did not give him the final
say in all things Twistian; many more film, stage, and television adaptations of Oliver Twist would follow. Nevertheless, Lean’s film was clearly the most important and successful version of Twist presented on film up to that point, and thus its impact on the culture text is undeniable—one need only consider the fact that Bart himself had turned to the Lean film for inspiration. Consequently, the elements of Reed’s film that are inspired by the earlier Lean piece are not simple instances of borrowing from another movie, but rather, examples of a direct engagement with the cultural perception of Oliver Twist. The issue becomes even more interesting when one considers the important effect that the film version of Oliver! exerted on these same cultural perceptions.

The direct influence of Oliver! on the culture text of Oliver Twist can be detected in the family-oriented approach taken by numerous directors and screenwriters who have adapted Dickens’s novel for film and television in the decades following the Reed film. While Bart’s stage play was likewise intended for family audiences and exerted a global influence on popular perceptions of Twist through the various international productions of the show, the Reed motion picture provided an even more concrete model for family-film versions of the story. As Kael pointed out in her review, the film was geared toward a mass audience of children and adults. Many of the later adaptations of Twist inspired by Reed’s film have likewise been marketed directly to family audiences, despite the fact that the original novel and its subject matter are hardly geared towards children. The movie trailers for the recent Roman Polanski adaptation of Oliver Twist presented the film as one intended for families, playing up the more charming and comical elements of the story as opposed to the dark and macabre elements. Though the Polanski version borrows heavily from the Lean film, as the director virtually duplicates Lean’s climax by including a brief fight scene between Sikes and
the Dodger that prefigures the rooftop chase sequence towards the end of the movie, this adaptation also presents an ambiguously sympathetic and genuinely paternal Fagin who is in many ways far more analogous to the Ron Moody version of the character than the despicable Alec Guinness version. When Oliver begins residing with the thieves, Fagin kindly gives the orphan a new pair of boots to replace his tattered shoes which have been worn through on the walk to London. Later, after Oliver is wounded in the attempted robbery, Fagin tends to his gunshot wound in a paternal and caring way that is directly reminiscent of the paternal affection Moody shows for Oliver in the Reed film. The film concludes like the novel, with Fagin being sent to the gallows, but Polanski, who has kept the old man sympathetic in the eyes of both Oliver and the viewer, maintains this same level of sympathy up through the end, and this sensitive treatment of the character adds a tragic dimension to the conclusion in spite of Oliver’s happy ending.

This taming of Fagin in the various film and television versions of *Twist* that followed Reed’s *Oliver!* is perhaps the most obvious example of the film’s influence on the culture text, thus modifying the popular perceptions of *Twist* significantly from when these perceptions were dominated by the Lean film. Whereas Lean returned the story to its dark roots, these more recent adaptations have followed the family entertainment trends started by *Oliver!* With the exception of Eric Porter’s depiction of the character in a 1985 BBC adaptation, virtually every major adaptation of *Oliver Twist* produced since 1968 has featured a somewhat sympathetic interpretation of Fagin influenced to some degree by the Reed film. The 1982 Clive Donner film, featuring George C. Scott as Fagin, plays up the old man’s vulnerability as a Jew in an anti-Semitic society. The paternal side of the character is likewise emphasized as Scott’s Fagin is perfectly willing to let Oliver go and live with
Brownlow and tries to persuade Monks to do likewise; in this version, Monks is far more detestable than Fagin, much as Sikes is the central villain in the Reed film. Later in the movie, Fagin is arrested and condemned to hang, but he maintains his goodhearted nature and continues to provide Oliver with assistance and care, informing the orphan of where he can find the proof of his birthright. Fagin thus retains the same paternal sympathy conveyed in the musical film, a distinct divergence from the monstrous incarnation of the character presented in the Lean adaptation.

Other examples of sympathetic Fagins influenced by the Reed adaptation can be found in a 1997 Disney Channel adaptation starring Richard Dreyfus in the role, and a 1999 Masterpiece Theatre adaptation with Robert Lindsay. The Disney Channel film, directed by Tony Bill, accentuates the same fatherly qualities of Fagin presented in the Reed adaptation. Dreyfus’s Fagin speaks to Oliver of his own loneliness and his fears that the boys will someday abandon him, thus prompting Oliver to pledge his fidelity to the old man. Even as Fagin engages in dishonest activities throughout the film, he remains compassionate toward Oliver and genuinely caring toward his young charges. Fagin repeatedly and exaggeratedly dotes on the boys like a proud father, presenting the same sort of comical thoughtfulness embodied by Moody in his performance of numbers like “Be Back Soon” and “I’d Do Anything.” Toward the end of the film, as Oliver and Fagin prepare to go their separate ways, the orphan voices his gratitude toward the old man; Fagin is actually reduced to tears as a result. Lindsay’s portrayal in the Masterpiece Theatre version is one of the darker incarnations of the character in the years since the Reed film, but even Lindsay’s Fagin seems more evocative of Moody than of Guinness given the theatricality associated with this

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9 Lindsay had previously played Fagin in the Palladium revival of Oliver!, stepping into the role in 1996. Despite the fact that he did not originate the role in this particular revival, he won an Olivier award for his performance.
version of the old man. Here, Fagin is the consummate showman, utilizing magic tricks and music so as to keep his audience—the gang—enthralled. Like Moody’s Fagin, Lindsay’s version understands the importance of theatricality and song to keeping the gang under his thumb.

There are countless other examples of the Reed film’s influence on these family-oriented adaptations of *Twist*. The Disney Channel version places heavy emphasis on the friendship between Oliver and the Artful Dodger, and the congenial relationship between the two characters seems lifted directly from the Reed film. The Donner film stresses Nancy’s maternal devotion to Oliver, as she cares for him when he is suffering from a fever and frequently puts herself in danger so as to prevent him from being hurt. When Rose offers her financial compensation for her kindness towards Oliver, the prostitute replies: “I haven’t done this for the money. It’s knowing Oliver’s…out of harm’s way, that’s all I want.” Indeed, all four of the aforementioned film adaptations, the Polanski, Donner, *Masterpiece Theatre*, and Disney Channel versions, accentuate this quality of Nancy’s character, a quality that is virtually absent from the Lean film but which plays an especially significant role in the Reed version of *Oliver!* Clearly, the cultural perception of the relationship between these two characters has been impacted heavily by the Reed adaptation, as nearly all of the adaptations produced since this film have intimated that Nancy genuinely loves the child.

While the effect of *Oliver!* on the culture text of *Oliver Twist* can be viewed as either positive or negative dependent on the view one takes of the adaptation, the basis for Pointer’s criticisms becomes more understandable if one considers the fact that the film version of *Oliver!* has perhaps proved itself capable of supplanting the actual Dickens text in the general consciousness. *Oliver Twist*, as it was written by Dickens, hardly fits the traditional
definition of “wholesome, family entertainment,” and yet Oliver!, along with each one of the
two aforementioned adaptations of Twist that followed, could clearly be categorized as such. The
dark satire of the original novel is supplanted with sentimental jollity in the film musical.
This seems to be the chief source of Pointer’s criticism of Reed’s adaptation, though of
course, Reed was already working with subject matter that was intended for family
audiences, that is, Bart’s musical. Nevertheless, the widespread appeal of Reed’s Oliver!,
along with the marketing campaign behind it, meant that Oliver! was now capable of fully
usurping the meaning of Dickens’s novel. For certain, a young viewer who cut his
Dickensian teeth on Oliver! would be turned off by the darkness of Dickens’s text and thus
might be tempted to eschew the original novel entirely, content to utilize the film musical as
his or her sole means of exposure to the story of Oliver. Pointer’s fears about infidelity to the
original source are more logical when one considers the prospect of a revised version of the
original story becoming the dominant version of that story, particularly when the revised
version takes so many liberties with the source.10

In spite of this controversy surrounding the Reed film, there was no denying that Oliver!
had already become a cultural phenomenon. Less than ten years into its existence, Bart’s
adaptation had broken performance records, spawned an Oscar winning film, and changed
the face of British musical theater entirely. Despite its relative infancy, the legacy of Oliver!
had seemingly been cemented. The following decade saw profitable revivals and touring
productions in England, as well as a string of successful foreign productions.

If Oliver! was thriving, however, its creator was floundering. The late 60s and 70s
witnessed the downfall of Lionel Bart, a seemingly impossible occurrence given the fact that

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10 This concept of reducing Dickens to the simplest and most jolly form for the sake of marketing him to a
family audience is the basis of Chapter 6.
the man had written the most successful and widely seen British musical of all time just a few short years earlier. It was a devastating combination of poor business decisions and personal financial irresponsibility that spelled certain doom for Bart’s fortune. Furthermore, while *Oliver!* should have marked the start of a long string of timeless musicals, Bart never came close to attaining the same level of success that he had found with his Dickensian adaptation.

Though the disastrous Robin Hood musical spoof *Twang!!* is almost universally regarded as the turning point in Bart’s career and fortunes, the fallout from this particular musical was far worse than it needed to be. Every writer, producer, and composer in the world of musical theater must deal with the occasional flop. If Bart had been more fiscally responsible, *Twang!!* could effortlessly have been dismissed as nothing more than a creative failure. Unfortunately, Bart turned a creative failure into a financial disaster by investing his own money into the ill-fated musical and stubbornly refusing to acknowledge that he was standing aboard a sinking ship: “As Bart saw it, the *Twang!!* problem was simply financial: he argued that if the show were allowed a dignified burial in Manchester, the backers would lose £100,000. If, as he hoped, the show transferred to London and perished instantly, the loss would be £130,000. He was eager to risk that £30,000 to prove a point—to prove that a worthless satire on Sherwood green was another Bart masterpiece” (Roper 89). Bart squandered his own fortune to try and salvage the show, and subsequently made what can only be regarded as “the most disastrous business decision in post-war British theatre” (Wheeler 158)—he sold the rights to *Oliver!* It was a decision that, by his own estimation, cost him £100,000,000 in the long run (Wheeler 158).
Coupled with the financial catastrophe was an even more alarming decline in Bart’s creative output. His musical version of Fellini’s film _La Strada_ ran for only one night on Broadway in 1969, and his adaptation of Hugo’s _Notre Dame de Paris_, a musical that he called _Quasimodo_, never even reached the stage. Following these efforts, Bart almost faded into obscurity. In his own text on the history of musical theater, the great Alan Jay Lerner reflected that “it is difficult to believe that talent such as Lionel Bart’s could simply disappear” (221), and yet, this is exactly what happened. In 1972, he declared bankruptcy and descended into alcoholism.

In spite of _Oliver!’s_ popularity, Bart’s downfall seemed solid evidence of the fact that nothing lasts forever. If Bart himself could suffer such a reversal, was there any guarantee that his masterpiece would continue to endure? For certain, _Oliver!_ had proved that it was more than a fad. The highly successful 1977 revival at the Albery Theatre, the same theater where it had debuted a full seventeen years earlier, was welcomed by critics with both a warm sense of nostalgia and a new appreciation for what this show had achieved. Irving Wardle of the _Times_ wrote that it was “sad to think that _Oliver!_ first appeared 17 years ago, since when there has hardly been a single British musical worth remembering. As Bart’s own subsequent work proved, the success of this piece cannot be reduced to formula. But there it stands as a lasting demonstration that a virile dramatic form can be built out of the old music-hall tradition, and that the sage can popularize classics without betraying them” (5). B.A. Young of the _London Financial Times_ echoed these sentiments, going so far as to label _Oliver!_ a “miraculous musical” (3). Still, even at this point, _Oliver!_ was a relative infant in comparison to some of the American shows from the golden age of Broadway. Could this show achieve the same level of staying power as its American counterpart, _Oklahoma!_, or
would it eventually find itself outdated and irrelevant? The fact that Oliver! had premiered in 1960 as a result of the innovative forces at work in the English theater meant that it was the product of a certain time and movement—while its appeal transcended the limitations of time and place, sustaining that appeal in the decades that were yet to come would undoubtedly necessitate some sort of evolution.

The question of Oliver!’s future was by now out of the hands of Lionel Bart. Fortunately, the musical would find a powerful ally and protector in one of the greatest British theater impresarios of the twentieth century: Sir Cameron Mackintosh. It was Mackintosh who helped produce the 1977 Albery Theatre revival of Oliver!, though his involvement with this particular musical stemmed back to the very first touring production in 1965. While the enduring popularity of Oliver! is attributable to the creative genius of Lionel Bart, the continued success that the show achieved in the decades following its initial production, more specifically, in the 1990s and onward, is thanks in large part to the personal involvement of Cameron Mackintosh himself, a man whom Mervyn Rothstein of the New York Times once labeled “the most successful, influential and powerful theatrical producer in the world” (48). Mackintosh’s hands-on approach to the theatrical production process, his personal affection for this musical, and his friendship with Lionel Bart would all prove essential to Oliver!’s evolution.

Cameron Mackintosh was born October 17, 1946 to Ian and Diana Mackintosh; his father was a British jazz musician and his mother a Maltese secretary to the actor Nigel Patrick (Morley and Leon 14-15). At the tender age of eight, the young Mackintosh had already decided upon his vocation. Whereas most children are inspired to become actors, singers, directors, or even writers upon seeing their first show, Mackintosh’s initial exposure to the
musical stage through Julian Slade’s *Salad Days* left him eager to become a producer (Rothstein 86). The aspiring impresario impetuously approached the show’s writer following a second trip to see the musical and asked about the “magic piano” incorporated into the show (Morley and Leon 15). While other children might have been disappointed to learn that Minnie the piano was merely a clever prop as opposed to a genuine artifact, or that the show’s flying saucer was elevated with wires, the young Mackintosh found these backstage elements of stagecraft fascinating, a true indicator of his early passion for the production process. This passion continued to unfold as he reached adolescence. Like countless other Britons of all ages, Mackintosh went to see *Oliver!* when it debuted in the West End. Accompanied by his aunt, who had previously been responsible for exposing him to his first musical several years earlier, the young Mackintosh sat enthralled as Bart’s adaptation came to life onstage. Though still only a schoolboy “queuing for a shilling ticket in the gallery” (Morley and Leon 20), he would begin his odyssey from musical aficionado to theater impresario only a few short years later.

Like Lionel Bart, Mackintosh’s formal training in his profession was limited. Though he received a grant to study at the Central School of Speech and Drama in the field of stage management, he dropped out after only a year (Rothstein 86). Mackintosh later reflected on his lack of motivation at school, claiming that “as soon as I started I realized that I was never going to fit into the course. I was terribly anxious to get on and do it, but they kept telling me I would have to learn about Euripides and the historical past, whereas all I really cared about was the next band-call and whether I could get in somewhere backstage and start learning what it was all about” (qtd. in Morley and Leon 17). Following his time at the Central School, Mackintosh proceeded with a less formal but far more enlightening
education as he actively sought out employment with various theater companies in hopes of learning the ins and outs of the production process. He eventually found a position as a stagehand at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, a theater which would later serve as the home of one his mega-musicals, Miss Saigon, and which is now set to stage the producer’s latest revival of Oliver! in January 2009. Clearly, Mackintosh’s journey from stagehand to producer is a Cinderella story befitting any Dickensian hero.

The show playing at Drury Lane when Mackintosh first joined the company was Camelot and the young stagehand, who clearly had a passion for the industry, quickly worked his way up to assistant stage manager. When the time came for his next job, Mackintosh had the option of going on tour with Camelot, or transferring to the New Theatre where the touring production of Oliver! was rehearsing. His decision to work on Oliver! would eventually prove immeasurably important to the afterlife of the musical. As Morley and Leon put it, Oliver! has, in many ways, proved to be the “key musical of the Mackintosh career. Time and again he revived it on the road and as the line producer on Broadway” (20), and in 1994, he succeeded in helping the show evolve to the point where it was ready for the journey into a new century.

In an article published in the 1994 Palladium revival souvenir brochure, Mackintosh fondly reminisced on his involvement with Oliver!, a production for which he not only served as assistant stage manager, but that likewise found him a (somewhat unwilling) performer as well:

On the first day of rehearsal I arrived, efficient with pencil and notepad, amazed at the noisy mayhem that accompanies the first day of any rehearsal, when suddenly I was asked to sing “Consider Yourself” in front of everyone as one of the two assistant stage managers had to go on stage during the show. I was mortified. Having got through a couple of choruses I stopped and a voice said, “Do it again, we weren’t listening.” After
my second go I was told, “That was pretty awful but the other A.S.M. is tone deaf so you’ll have to do.” (par. 4)

Working on *Oliver!* proved to be the sort of hands-on education that Mackintosh had hoped to attain while at school. Not only did he get to learn all of the technical elements of theatrical production backstage, but he likewise got to experience the show from the perspective of a performer: “It really was an amazing education, the greatest chance in the world to do everything, and rather like being paid to go to school….But to be part of a musical that really worked, and to see it every day and night from both sides of the footlights—that is something I have never forgotten, and *Oliver!* really explains my passion for musicals” (qtd. in Morley and Leon 20). To this day, *Oliver!* holds a central place in the producer’s heart. If *Oliver!* left its mark on Cameron Mackintosh, however, Mackintosh has returned the favor many times over.

The touring production premiered in Manchester, and it was here that Mackintosh met Lionel Bart himself for the first time. It marked the start of a friendship that would last thirty years (Morley and Leon 25). In his article, Mackintosh recalls Bart’s having asked him what he hoped to do in theater; Mackintosh confided that his dream was to become a producer and put on shows like *Oliver!*: “No one could ever accuse me of being shy” (par. 5). Nevertheless, Mackintosh’s fairytale journey from assistant stage manager on *Oliver!* to the show’s producer had already started, as the skills he learned while working on this show, along with his deep passion for the material, would both be fundamental components of his maturation.

Following his involvement with *Oliver!,* Mackintosh continued to find work with various touring productions as deputy stage manager. In 1969, after only a few short years in the business, Mackintosh produced his first show: a revival of Cole Porter’s *Anything Goes* that
unfortunately failed to find an audience. Undeterred, the young producer worked tirelessly to raise money in order to produce several straight shows both in and around London. Success usually proved elusive, and the limited production funds meant that producing expensive musicals would be all but impossible. Nevertheless, a musical would prove to be his first big hit: the revue show *Side by Side by Sondheim*, first produced in 1976, was an unexpected success: “Suddenly…Mackintosh had within a few months become the most respected young producer around Shaftesbury Avenue” (Morley and Leon 45). It is unsurprising that Mackintosh found his first true success with a musical given his fondness for these shows, and it is perhaps even less surprising that, following this success, he turned his attention back to *Oliver!*, the show on which he had cut his teeth and “which he still thinks of as the crucible of the modern musical” (Morley and Leon 48). The young producer was keenly interested in a revival tour of the Bart musical, and, having been brought into contact with Donald Albery through the production of *Side by Side by Sondheim* at the Wyndham, he set about trying to bring his vision to fruition.

By this point, Albery had sold the rights to the show to a film company, Southbrook, and Mackintosh met with owner Derek Dawson in the spring of 1976 to discuss the project. Dawson not only granted permission for the touring revival but also volunteered to help finance the show (Mackintosh, par. 8). The revival premiered in Leicester and worked its way through Birmingham, Eastbourne, Bournemouth, Wolverhampton, Oxford, and Manchester—playing at the very same theater where Cameron Mackintosh himself had first served on the stage crew. Though *Oliver!* was still the same beloved British musical, Mackintosh put his own stamp on the production by defying convention. While Leicester was hardly the West End, Mackintosh staged the show as “a full replica of the original,
designed to tour the major theatres, those that used to be known as ‘number one dates.’ And he planned to do it in a manner thoroughly unusual for the time—not apologetically or cheaply, as if it were a brand new show on its way into town instead of out of it” (Morley and Leon 48). The tour was thus very popular with audiences, so popular that when Mackintosh asked Donald Albery if he could return *Oliver!* to its former home at the New Theatre (now the Albery), the veteran producer agreed. Albery predicted a three month engagement, though his secretary respectfully disagreed claiming that he had underestimated just how popular *Oliver!* really was (Mackintosh, par. 10). Sure enough, the 1977 West End revival ran for over 1,100 performances; Mackintosh’s first attempt to produce *Oliver!* had proved a rousing success. Furthermore, he had started a new trend with regional tours: “The opening of old shows in such spectacular new stagings [meant] that they could take on a whole new life of their own, maybe even ending up back in the West End” (Morley and Leon 49).

Mackintosh would exert an even stronger influence on the legacy of *Oliver!* several years later, though not before suffering some setbacks. Although *Oliver!*’s popularity had endured in its native England, a return engagement across the Atlantic would not enjoy the same level of success.

Following a profitable Christmastime revival of *Oliver!* in December of 1983 at the Aldwych Theatre, this time starring the incomparable Ron Moody as Fagin, the show was transferred to New York. Broadway leading lady Patti Lupone took on the part of Nancy, and with Moody playing Fagin, success seemed assured. Surprisingly, the Broadway revival of *Oliver!* closed after just thirty performances. Mackintosh attributed the show’s failure to financial issues, as well as a markedly negative review in the *New York Times*: “Despite mostly great reviews, one was very negative. That one review was the most important one—
The New York Times. With expensive running costs the show could not turn the corner and closed after a few weeks” (par. 11). The negative New York Times review came from Frank Rich, a theater critic who, like many of his peers, disapproved of the British mega-musical trends that dominated 1980s Broadway. While Oliver!, as a revival of an older musical, may not have fallen into this category, it had served as a progenitor of this movement in the British musical theater. Furthermore, Rich’s distaste for several of Andrew Lloyd Webber’s shows, most of which were produced by Mackintosh, seemed to prefigure his dismissal of the Broadway revival of Oliver!: “Until Andrew Lloyd Webber’s hits started to roll off the assembly line in the 1970’s, Lionel Bart’s ‘Oliver!’ held the record as the longest-running English musical ever to play Broadway. I’m afraid that this distinction says more about the quality of other English musicals than it does about the merits of ‘Oliver!’ (11). If American reviewers of the first Broadway production of Oliver! masked resentment of a British musical finding success on Broadway through complaints about fidelity to the source material, Rich was far less diplomatic in his disregard for the English musical stage.

It is rather ironic that Mackintosh still attributes the premature closing of Oliver! to a New York Times review given that many of the musicals he produced in the 1980s were huge box office draws, but simultaneously faced bitter censure from hostile American theater critics like Rich. For certain, as the European mega-musical began to dominate Broadway tastes, the opinions of New York critics became increasingly irrelevant. As Jessica Sternfeld points out, Cats, Mackintosh’s first true smash and the show that put him on the map as one of the dominant forces in musical theater, was almost universally panned by traditionalist American critics when it reached Broadway. Nevertheless, it went on to become the most successful show of all time up to that point in history. Other mega-musicals produced in the 1980s
including Les Miserables and The Phantom of the Opera did not meet with universal acclaim from critics yet managed to attain great success with audiences: “Critics, in the case of the megamusical, largely ceased to matter” (Sternfeld 4). Oliver! may have been a victim of the New York Times, but the influence of Broadway critics over audience preferences would soon wane heavily. Thus, Rich’s resentment for the mega-musical trend and for British musicals in general becomes all the more obvious.

The dichotomy between the reactions to the revivals of Oliver! in the United Kingdom and the United States is difficult to characterize, as each individual production undoubtedly had its own distinctive qualities: comparing the 1977 and 1983 West End revivals with the 1984 Broadway production is all but impossible given the different casts, theaters, production teams, and orchestras. Nevertheless, the fact that British audiences were willing to re-embrace Oliver! less than ten years after it had closed, while American audiences proved unresponsive twenty years after the initial Broadway production, seems indicative of the cultural appeal that Oliver! had maintained in its native Britain—an appeal that did not necessarily transfer over to the United States. Though Oliver! had achieved great success in its initial Broadway run, particularly in comparison to the British musicals that had made the transatlantic journey before it, it was not etched into the consciousness of American audiences in the same way that it was in the United Kingdom. British critics had heralded the first West End production of Oliver! as a major coup in the history of British musical theater; though several American critics echoed this statement, the show obviously did not possess the same sort of historical significance in the United States.

Another element to consider relates to one particularly striking passage from Rich’s review in which he compares the stage version of Oliver! with the Reed film. As mentioned, Rich,
like Pauline Kael, believed that the motion picture version of *Oliver!* surpassed the stage version in terms of overall quality. Herein lies one of the key difficulties involved in producing *Oliver!* in the years following the film version: given that the film adaptation was so well-executed and remains a motion picture classic, how can one persuade people to come and see an expensive live musical when it would cost significantly less to simply rent or buy the highly enjoyable movie? It was an issue with which Mackintosh and the creative team that he assembled for his next attempt to revive *Oliver!* would wrestle, and ultimately, the film would become a vitally useful tool in the great producer’s attempts to restore *Oliver!* to its original glory. Though the failure of the Broadway revival of *Oliver!* was a setback for Mackintosh, this failure eventually proved to be a blessing in disguise regarding the show’s legacy. It was the early closing of *Oliver!* on Broadway that inspired Mackintosh to think about the musical’s future (Mackintosh, par. 12).11 The results of these ruminations were fundamentally important to *Oliver!*’s evolution.

Mackintosh held off on returning to *Oliver!* until the early 90s, for to restage the musical prematurely would lead to its feeling like yet another revival when in fact the producer was planning something completely different. For nearly ten years, he refused requests for productions of the show, determined to see to it that the musical would have a fresh feel when it opened again (Morley and Leon 161). Creating this new vision of *Oliver!* meant breaking with some of the elements that had defined the show in the past.

Mackintosh had always held Sean Kenny’s creations in the highest esteem, dating all the way back to his youth: “Cameron had first come across Kenny’s work when he was still a

11 The sudden and tragic death of Peter Coe in a car accident a few short years later would likewise prove important to Mackintosh’s ruminations on the future of *Oliver!* as the death of one of the brilliant creative forces behind *Oliver!* caused the producer to reflect on where the great musical had come from and where it might go from here (Morley and Leon 161).
schoolboy and he was entranced by his unique ability to make a theatrical space dramatically exciting” (Morley and Leon 160). Unsurprisingly, this regard for Kenny’s designs and constructions extended to Oliver!, and the grandeur of the Oliver! set left a distinct impression on Mackintosh even when he was simply an audience member experiencing Bart’s adaptation for the first time: “[The stage design] not only brought Dickensian London to life but swept away all the cosy trappings of realistic theater. Every scene change was done in front of the audience so we were led pied piper like through the story; the set acting as a choreographer of the action, swiftly propelling the story to its dramatic conclusion” (Mackintosh, par. 1). As discussed in the previous chapters, Kenny’s set was the only element of Oliver! that practically every single British and American critic who saw the show had praised unhesitatingly. The Kenny set had been utilized in both the American Broadway production of Oliver!, and in the tours and revivals Mackintosh staged in Britain in the 1970s. The only downside to the magnificent set’s popularity, however, was that virtually every production that utilized this scenery had to duplicate Coe’s original blocking because of the boundaries created by Kenny’s construction. Mackintosh noted that the Kenny set “was… keeping the show imprisoned in its old production. Unless I took the gamble to change the set, I would never get a talented director to give the show a fresh look” (par. 13).

With the approval of Derek Dawson, Mackintosh began work on a new vision of Oliver! Thus, when he staged the musical once more in 1994, the show would prove to be more than a simple revival. It would instead prove to be a bold reinvention of the adaptation, one heavily influenced by the vision of Mackintosh, the creativity of Sam Mendes, the popularity of the Carol Reed film, and the devotion of Lionel Bart to his greatest creation.
Mackintosh’s first step in revising *Oliver!* was to find a new director, and Sam Mendes was an excellent choice due in large part to his personal affection for the property—like Mackintosh, he had been fond of the musical since his childhood. Mendes, who at that time was artistic director at the Donmar Warehouse, was still establishing himself though he had already attained a tremendous reputation at a young age. In an article written by Mendes for the Palladium souvenir booklet, the director creates a series of diary entries chronicling his involvement with *Oliver!%; humorously, the entries span all the way back to his childhood. In an entry recounting his first time watching the film version, Mendes notes that “I learn the songs instantly and model myself on Jack Wild, cultivating the hands in pockets posture and the general air of worldweariness” (par. 1). In 1976, he saw the musical on stage for the first time: “I pine ever so slightly for Jack Wild but this is compensated for by a splendid set which revolves endlessly, some satisfyingly noisy kids and a very long curtain call. Want to be taken back to see it again without delay” (par. 2). It would be a full sixteen years later before Mendes would receive a call from Mackintosh about the possibility of reinventing *Oliver!* Mendes’s revised version of Bart’s show would ultimately stand alongside his bold 1995 revival of Sondheim’s *Company* and his revolutionary 1998 version of Kander and Ebb’s *Cabaret*, as his brilliant work on all three shows solidified his reputation as a visionary director of musicals.

Mendes was a tireless contributor to the revision process. Not only did he direct the new version of the show, but he assisted in re-designing the set to the musical while simultaneously modifying and updating the libretto, a process that will be described in detail later in this chapter. It is fitting that Mendes’s first exposure to *Oliver!* was the film version,
however, as the film would become an indispensable tool for the young director in re-envisioning Bart’s musical.

It was Mendes who ultimately suggested Anthony Ward for the role of production designer (Mackintosh, par. 15). Like Mendes, Ward’s work on Oliver! marked a new step in his career for he had never designed anything on the scale of the set that Mackintosh was imagining, though he had previously worked on productions of Tchaikovsky’s Nutcracker and Sondheim’s Assassins. His experiences working on Oliver! would serve him well, and over the course of the next several years, he would design the sets for big-budget revivals of Oklahoma!, My Fair Lady, and Gypsy, as well as new musicals like the recent stage version of Chitty Chitty Bang Bang. Mackintosh’s intimate knowledge of how the Kenny set had worked proved useful to Ward during the pre-production process, as understanding the form and function of this construction allowed him to consider the qualities that would be essential to his own version of the Oliver! set (Mackintosh, par. 15).

One of the most significant contrasts between this new vision for the set and the older Kenny vision was the idea of realism—the Kenny set had been highly abstract, while the new Ward vision would be far more naturalistic. Whereas the Kenny set signified new locations by rotating and creating different kinds of spaces in which the actors could move, the locations utilized in the Ward set were more obvious in their contrasts. Ward notes that “we didn’t want the audience to wonder where they were at any point. The show moves very swiftly—the action flows very fast. So the audience always needs to know where they are” (qtd. in “Design Challenge,” par. 2). While Kenny’s revolving set was made up of three very large masses that unfolded and refolded like an origami figure, the new set was made up of a greater number of separate pieces that could slide on and off—all of the many locations used
in the musical, such as the workhouse, the London streets, Fagin’s den, the Three Cripples, and even the untamed moors which Agnes must cross, thus had their own specific bits of scenery. This larger scale seemed fitting, for while the Albery Theatre could seat only 872 patrons, the Palladium could hold 2,286.

Comparing the new version of the *Oliver!* set to its predecessor is a bit unfair, as no set could possibly have proven as revolutionary as the original Kenny construction. The Kenny set was very much a product of the 1950s and 60s, Brechtian in both its design and function. The Ward set likewise reflected the period in which it was constructed, as its grandeur and breathtaking scope showed the influence of the mega-musical trends of the 80s and 90s, though Mackintosh was determined not to repeat himself. The original *Oliver!* set, like the set for *Les Miz*, functioned on a revolve—thus, for the revival set, Ward, Mendes, and Mackintosh “decided to try and use laterally moving trucks and flying bridges as the language of the new production” (Mackintosh, par. 15). The results were a sort of amalgamation of the original set and the set used for the Reed film; Ward’s design proved functional and architecturally interesting, but simultaneously cinematic in its artistry.

The amount of effort and thought that went into the creation of this new set is undeniable, as Mackintosh notes that it took Mendes and Ward nearly six months to work out the design (par. 15). This effort is reflected in the model book created by the production designers for the revival. Featuring small-scale designs and photographs, this book is a visual masterpiece and a stunning Dickensian artifact; the image of the tiny paper-doll performers moving about the model sets is evocative of the very same kind of toy theater that Dickens himself must have owned and played with in his youth. These models of the characters, taken directly from Cruikshank’s own drawings, are phenomenally detailed and reflect the fact that the
creative minds behind this revival were determined to stay true to the Dickensian elements of
the musical adaptation. Along with the set pieces that slide on and off, Ward designed a
beautiful backdrop of a foggy English horizon (complete with simulated moving clouds). To
fully convey the breadth of London as it is portrayed in “Consider Yourself,” Ward created
two different set models of the dome to St. Paul’s, one small and intended mainly for
background views, and a larger version intended for close-up appearances. By alternating
between the two as the Dodger sings his number, Ward creates the illusion of the young
pickpocket navigating through the enormous metropolis and moving closer to the cathedral
the whole time. Whereas Kenny’s set was not designed to realistically simulate such things,
Ward’s set attempts to achieve the kind of stylized yet detailed realism that defined Box’s set
for the Reed film in 1968. In spite of these divergences, the influence of Kenny can be seen
in the linking bridges, staircases, and rafters that slid on and offstage throughout the show to
both facilitate the movement of actors and to simulate different physical layouts to
environments such as Fagin’s den and the workhouse. Thus, Ward’s set never sacrifices
function for artistry.

With Ward’s set and costume designs helping to distinguish the show visually from its
previous incarnations, Mackintosh set about hiring other talented artists to assist in the
reinvention of Oliver!, including choreographer Matthew Bourne, sound designers Paul
Groothuis and Mike Walker, and lighting designer David Hersey. Mackintosh’s article notes
that with a few exceptions, “none of the production team…had even been born when
Lionel’s masterpiece was first written” (par.17), a fact which further allowed for the
Palladium version of the musical to make an exciting break from the past while remaining
true to the spirit of the original version of Bart’s show. In spite of these divergences,
however, Mackintosh never broke so fundamentally from the original that the final product proved unrecognizable. There is perhaps no better indication of this conviction than the fact that Lionel Bart himself was instrumental in bringing the Palladium version to fruition.

By the 1980s, Bart was still suffering from alcoholism and his liver had been damaged as a result of his drinking habits, which, at their peak, included three bottles of vodka a day (Barker 13). After being given only weeks to live, Bart joined Alcoholics Anonymous and eventually managed to overcome his addiction. Given his fondness for Oliver!, it is not surprising that Cameron Mackintosh also had a definite fondness for Lionel Bart himself. Mackintosh had already proven a generous friend—while producing the 1977 revival, Mackintosh invited Bart to assist with the production and gave him some money from the show despite the fact that the composer had already lost the rights to his masterpiece. The Palladium version of Oliver! allowed Mackintosh to take things even further, as Bart was brought in to collaborate with Mendes on revising the libretto. Bart not only assisted with the script, but likewise wrote new music and lyrics. Mackintosh’s gratitude toward the composer for his assistance in this endeavor was significant, and, in a touching display of generosity, the impresario gave the composer a share of the show’s royalties (Barker 13).

Of course, the creative team behind this new revival of Oliver! had to walk a fine line in revising the show, for transforming the still-loved Oliver! to the point where it was no longer familiar would undoubtedly hamper the show’s chances for success—why fix what is not truly broken? As such, Mendes and Bart turned to two excellent sources when considering what revisions to make to the show. The modifications to the Palladium version of the show were influenced primarily by the Reed film, which had now irreversibly shaped the cultural perceptions of Twist as well as the popularity of the adaptation itself, and the original novel,
which served as a particularly useful source regarding dialogue and character interactions. Other sources would prove inspiring to Mendes as well, including Peter Ackroyd’s definitive biography on Dickens, and of course, the 1948 Lean film (Mendes, par. 3). In short, the writers approached their task with a determination to revitalize Oliver! through the use of many effective supplemental tools without tampering with the elements that had made it a success to begin with.

An archival draft of the Palladium script dated September 7, 1994 contains illuminating notes regarding the changes made to Oliver! over the course of its development for the initial run at the Palladium. In the margins of the script are notations labeled SM (Sam Mendes), LB (Lionel Bart), Film, and Dickens. The first two notations indicate who was responsible for changes to the libretto, be it Mendes or Bart, while the latter two indicate whether these modifications were based on either the film screenplay or on Dickens’s novel. The changes based on the novel are confined largely to dialogue, while the changes based on the film include added scenes and revised portrayals of certain characters. The former serve to expand the amount of Dickensian humor in the musical, while the latter serve to broaden the scope of the show.

In the first act of the Palladium version of Oliver!, Dickens’s text proves a fruitful source of character-based humor that is conveyed primarily through dialogue. This is especially apparent in the Bumble and Corney courtship scene, and the scenes featuring the Sowerberries. For the scene set in Mrs. Corney’s parlour, Mendes and Bart return to several different chapters from the novel in order to flesh out the characters slightly and to incorporate more of Dickens’s hilarious dialogue. Like many of the Twist adaptors who came before them, including numerous Victorian playwrights and Lean himself, Mendes and
Bart merge elements from the novel’s earlier scene between Mrs. Mann and Mr. Bumble together with the later courtship scene featuring Mrs. Corney; in the revised libretto, Mrs. Corney offers Mr. Bumble some gin, which, in a humorous visual gag lifted directly from the Lean film, she keeps hidden under a tea cozy. The absurdly funny conversation between Mrs. Corney and Mr. Bumble regarding her pet cats is also expanded based on Dickens’s dialogue. The humor of this extended scene is reminiscent of the various versions of this sequence which proved so popular with Victorian audiences throughout the nineteenth century, and, like the playwrights who adapted *Twist* for the stage in the Victorian period, Mendes and Bart find great inspiration by working directly from the novel itself.

The Sowerberry scenes are also extended slightly so as to incorporate more dialogue from the original text and to further define the characters of the Sowerberries themselves. Mrs. Sowerberry’s shrewish yet self-pitying personality is more distinct in the Palladium version, and the writers also include her absurd and hysterical laugh, which, according to Dickens, always seems to “threaten…violent consequences” (35). Oliver’s confrontation with Noah Claypole is likewise expanded through dialogue from the novel: Bart includes Oliver’s line about his mother having “died of a broken heart” (24), and Noah’s subsequent taunts. This trend of adding more dialogue from Dickens’s text continues into the next part of the scene when Mr. Bumble comes to investigate Oliver’s rebellion; included is the beadle’s description of how to quash Oliver’s unruliness, and his humorously unflattering description of Agnes as well: “Excitable natures, Mrs. Sowerberry! That mother of his made her way to the workhouse gates against difficulties and pain that would have killed any well-disposed woman weeks before” (26). By incorporating more action and dialogue into both the Corney
and Sowerberry scenes, the writers succeed in transforming all of these characters from minor roles in a musical adaptation to humorous, fundamentally Dickensian players.

If the novel is a useful source for adding bits of dialogue and creating a more distinctly Dickensian vision of the supporting cast, the film proves an especially invaluable source from the point of view of the plot. While the changes made to the dialogue are novelistic, the changes made to the plot are largely cinematic, and the broader visual scope of the Palladium version seems to facilitate the addition of scenes not included in the original libretto. Though most of these cinematic changes are, unsurprisingly, inspired by the Reed film, one of the first modifications made to the show reveals Mendes’s decision to utilize the Lean adaptation as a source. The director includes a scene during the overture which features Oliver’s mother Agnes, clearly on the verge of giving birth, limping her way across the moors toward the workhouse. Mendes’s writing of the scene is a virtual duplication of how the Lean film begins:

The curtain rises on a windswept moor. There is a storm and in the near darkness we begin to make out the figure of a woman, dressed in rags, slowly but purposefully heading towards us. The storm rages and grows stronger, flashes of lightning briefly illuminating her agonised face. As she arrives downstage a huge clap of thunder and flash of lightning light up a set of enormous wrought iron gates which read ‘Workhouse’ (in reverse). As she collapses, a little old serving maid rushes to her aid. As the wind blows, she is dragged inside and the music of the storm grows calmer. In the darkness the cry of a little baby is heard. There is a beat, then, out of the black a large bell is revealed and rung. This sets up the rhythm of the entrance of the boys, nine years later, into the daily ritual of eating in the workhouse, and the music runs into the song. (v)

For the first time in the musical’s history, Agnes appears as a character, though, like her counterpart in the Lean film, she does not speak. Rather, the powerful image of the frail woman against the spectacular backdrops constructed by Ward tells the story without words.

From here, the show transitions to its traditional opening scene, “Food, Glorious Food,” and of course, Oliver’s subsequent request for more. Mendes incorporates several other
slight modifications here, many of which are clearly rooted in the Reed film version: during “Food, Glorious Food,” the well-fed members of the workhouse board file in followed by a cavalcade of waiters carrying delectable dinners meant solely for the board’s consumption—as mentioned, it is a visual that Reed himself borrowed from the Lean film, and the contrast between the half-starved, ragged children and the well-fed gentlemen is darkly humorous. Several of Lionel Bart’s contributions to the project are evident here as well, for the composer includes a new verse for the workhouse board characters to sing in “Oliver!” It is fitting that the board members take part in this number with Mrs. Corney and Mr. Bumble, for like these workhouse supervisors, the board sanctimoniously mistreats the children placed under their care:

**CHAIRMAN**
Pray some decorum restore, I implore…
Let us face this case, it’s
Unprecedented, quite utterly.

**GOVERNORS**
He’s disgraced this place,

**LARGE GOVERNOR**
Encouraging others to wallow in gluttony

**ALL**
Oliver, Oliver! Lock him in jail
And then put him on sale
For the highest bid
Better be rid of Oliver! (7)

Bart’s additions, like those of Mendes, contribute to the satire of the workhouse, a facet of the adaptation that is made more overt in the Palladium version. While the passionate and angry social criticism within Dickens’s original novel is still not fully included, the visual presence of the parish board, as well as the sanctimony in their lyrics allows for a greater appreciation of the hypocrisy that defines the system created by the Benthamite philosophy
behind the Poor Laws. The added satire allows for a more mature and cinematic depiction of the harsh world through which Oliver must navigate.

The Reed film again proves a useful source regarding the introduction of Sikes. Following the first scene in Fagin’s den, the old man goes out to see Sikes, who appears just outside the loft. The antagonistic housebreaker is thus introduced almost a full hour earlier than in the original libretto. As in the film, his entrance is underscored by the melody to “My Name,” and though he does not speak, his menace is immediately detectable—the conflict that will dominate Act II is thus established far more clearly in Act I. The scene that follows is virtually identical to the scene from the film: “He [Fagin] takes out a sack and holds it up to BILL. BILL disgorges the loot from various deep pockets – Silver platters, cutlery, jewelry, and other valuables” (43). Though Sikes will not return until Act II, his dangerous personality and potential for creating problems has already been established long before he sings “My Name.” The fact that this very significant new scene is incorporated into the Palladium version demonstrates the excellent choices that Reed made when creating his motion picture. The early introduction of Sikes adds a significant amount of conflict, tension, and foreshadowing to the plot. This introduction is also another testament to the cinematic grandeur of the Palladium version.

Mendes once again turns to the film for inspiration in the following scene when he incorporates some lines from the movie to flesh out the connection between Nancy and Oliver early on in their interactions. When the boys make fun of Oliver for bowing to the ladies, Nancy takes up his cause: “Don’t you take no notice of ‘em Oliver. Just cos you’ve got manners and they ain’t” (52). Shani Wallis has the exact same line in the film version. By placing emphasis on Nancy’s early affection for Oliver, her devotion to him later in the
play becomes more believable and the Nancy/Oliver subplot attains the same level of tragic scope that it achieves in the Reed adaptation. While the two writers preserve the original structure of “I’d Do Anything,” with Dodger singing to Nancy and Oliver singing to Bet, Nancy is more maternal and instructive during the number than in the original version. If the early introduction of Sikes is one of the most effective changes made from a storyline point of view, the modifications to the Nancy/Oliver subplot are the most effective from the standpoint of characterization as it is dictated by occurrences in the plot. Nearly all of these changes are based on the film version of the character, and all of them serve to add further significance to the bond between the two individuals. In the Palladium version, Nancy’s refusal to assist in the recapture of Oliver is not the result of self-interest, but rather, of fondness for Oliver and a determination to see him safe:

**NANCY**
Why can’t you leave the boy alone? He won’t you do no harm. Why can’t you leave him where he is—where he’ll get the chance of a decent life.

**SIKES**
You’ll get him back ‘ere my girl—unless you want to feel my hands on your throat.

*He throws NANCY onto a stool. FAGIN hurries across and speaks pleadingly at NANCY, trying to prevent more violence, which he hates.*

**FAGIN**
Nancy, my dear—if he talked, think what would happen to us. Think what would happen to Bill. It’d be the gallows for him, Nancy—the gallows! You wouldn’t let that happen would you, my dear? Not to Bill? Not to your Bill? (60)

Again, the dialogue is virtually lifted from the film adaptation, and the luxuries afforded to Carol Reed by the film medium, including the extra time to focus on characterization through the addition of new scenes and expanded character interactions, are incorporated into the stage show.
Since the film served as such a clear inspiration for many of the modifications made to the libretto for the Palladium version, it may seem somewhat surprising that the revised ending created for the film was not incorporated as well. Nevertheless, the musical’s conclusion stays true to its roots: the Dodger is hauled off by the Bow Street Runners, and Fagin’s reprise of “Reviewing the Situation” is the ambiguously hopeful version as opposed to the unashamedly cheerful version used in the film. According to Mackintosh, “Bart was not keen on the film ending. He thought it was too lighthearted. The Palladium ending is what Lionel wanted and reverts back to his original book of the show. Cameron said that for Lionel, being a Jewish East Ender himself, the Palladium ending is also about the dignity of the Jewish race pulling themselves together and facing life again” (Runciman, par. 2). Given the hardships that Bart himself had endured, his appreciation for Fagin’s determination to try and carve out a new life for himself in the face of certain adversity is comprehensible.

The Palladium version of *Oliver!* evolved out of Mackintosh’s desire to ensure that his favorite musical would remain relevant and popular as the decades passed, and the revisions made to the original script along with the new sets and staging certainly helped bring this goal to fruition—*Oliver!* was injected with new life while remaining fundamentally the same. The best way to describe the scope of the Palladium version of *Oliver!*, however, is to consider it as the first revised production of Bart’s musical to take into account that *Oliver!* had been put on film with great success several years earlier. Through their efforts, it now seemed impossible for anyone to argue that the experience of watching *Oliver!* on video could substitute for viewing a stage production. While the experience of watching a live musical show can certainly never be duplicated by viewing a film, the fact remains that, to a large and widespread audience, the Reed film was the definitive version of *Oliver!* Mendes
and Ward succeeded in taking some of the most effective cinematic modifications made by Reed and translating them to the stage, thus instilling *Oliver!* with a scope that seemed comparable to what could be achieved on film. Ironically, *Oliver!*, which had helped to prefigure the mega-musicals of Lloyd Webber, had received a makeover that allowed it to stand alongside these descendants in terms of its scale.

*Oliver!* opened at the Palladium on December 8, 1994: film and stage star Jonathan Pryce starred as Fagin, RSC veteran Sally Dexter played Nancy, and young actors James Daley and Adam Searles stepped into the roles of Oliver Twist and the Artful Dodger. The show was destined to be a hit, as the excitement surrounding it was unquestionable—a major revival of *Oliver!* had not been produced in either London or New York since 1984. Mackintosh’s knowledge of how to generate interest in musical productions was more than apparent in the new revival—millions of dollars in advance tickets were sold before the show had even opened. As with *Cats, Phantom, Les Miz*, and the other great shows that he had helped turn into huge successes thanks to his unique combination of artistic vision and business savvy, the producer succeeded in creating a great deal of hype for the return of *Oliver!* Mackintosh also succeeded in giving *Oliver!* a memorable image that could serve as its trademark insignia, much as the shadowy dancers in the cats’ eyes or the red rose alongside the white mask had done for *Cats* and *Phantom*, respectively. In this case, a heavily stylized visual of Fagin’s smiling face was created from the title *Oliver!*, with the “O” and “V” filling in for eyes, and the “L” being used for a nose. Fagin’s trademark flat hat and pointy beard are also painted in to fill out the old man’s defining features. It is an image that seems to perfectly convey Bart’s vision for the show, for although Fagin is not the title character, he is in many ways the star; moreover, the cartoonish, stylized drawing, which seems as though it might
have been finger-painted by a child, epitomizes how the young pickpockets in Fagin’s gang (along with the musical’s innumerable fans) view him—he is indeed the merry old gentleman, benevolently smiling on his charges. The image has been revived for the upcoming Drury Lane production, and it will likely endure as the trademark visual marketing symbol of Oliver! for years to come.

The opening night at the Palladium brought things full-circle for Oliver! as the response of the crowd was virtually identical to the response of those theatergoers who had first experienced Oliver! on its opening night in 1960: “As the curtain fell…the audience rose to its feet and roared for so long that the bewildered cast ran out of encores. Impresarios dream of such moments” (Fowler 14). There was also a similar sense of victory within the English press; Rebecca Fowler wrote an article for the London Times on the recent string of phenomenally successful British mega-musicals that had dominated both the West End and Broadway. Oliver!, which had helped to give rise to this movement in the British theater, was now fully integrated into the movement itself thanks to its mega-musical makeover. Fowler victoriously notes that the arrival of the mega-musical meant that “the British [had]…beat the Americans at their own game” (14), and the triumphant revival of Oliver! was simply further proof of the British domination of this genre which had once been so fundamentally American.

Of course, the revival could not fully duplicate the critical response of its forebear, and several traditionalists took exception to the changes that had been made to Oliver!, viewing them as representative of the excessiveness of the mega-musical trend. Whereas the original version of Oliver! had been met with tremendous acclaim in London, reviews of the Palladium show were somewhat mixed. Julie Burchill of the Sunday Times commented on
the intimidating dominance of the scenery, claiming that “the stars of this revival—and this is always depressing to write—are the sets. My tot, a veteran of hi-tech special effects, was gasping: ‘Are those clouds real?’ ‘No, baby, they’re painted.’ ‘No, they’re real. They’ve opened the roof up.’ You’ve heard of actors eating the scenery—well, you find yourself wishing that this scenery would eat the actors” (14). Anna Lee of *West End Extra* was far less delicate in her assessment, claiming that the Palladium *Oliver!* “epitomizes all that is wrong with [the] West End…. Production values reigned so supreme that character definition, plot, narrative and motivation were all ditched as excess baggage” (par. 1). It is the standard argument made against mega-musicals that the scenery dominates the show. Though *Oliver!* had been written years before this trend emerged, its importance as a forebear to the mega-musical movement has been discussed (see Chapter 2). The makeover it received from Mackintosh made the resemblance even more apparent for several critics. Paul Taylor of the *Independent Weekend* offered perhaps the most stinging criticism of the show as a mega-musical, noting that “Sam Mendes’ production has been so inflated by the advance hype that nothing, short of sending little Oliver into orbit, could have prevented an anti-climax” (28). Taylor cynically goes on to comment that the millions of dollars that the show would generate in revenue would prove an “irresistibly ironic contrast” (28) to the fact that Fagin’s greed in the play is supposed to be an indictment. Unfortunately, though Mackintosh’s personal touch had been responsible for taking *Oliver!* into a new decade and preparing the musical for a new century, his phenomenal success as a producer, coupled with the widespread popularity of his shows, meant that *Oliver!* would now be subjected to the same criticism that many traditionalists leveled toward mega-musicals—it was an ironically
similar response to the traditionalist criticism that *Oliver!* had faced upon debuting on Broadway.

Interestingly, some of the critics who complained about the new production drew attention to the lack of social criticism incorporated into the adaptation and its infidelity to the original source in that regard. Though Lee praises *Oliver!* as an excellent musical in spite of her disregard for the Palladium revival, she angrily states that Mendes failed to explore the adaptation’s potential for social criticism: “This is a musical of our time. Bart’s adaptation of *Oliver Twist* is a searing indictment of poverty, and how it is a one-way street to crime. The whole essence of *Oliver!* is that society is to blame” (par. 3). Taylor likewise criticized Bart’s “dogged sanitization” (28) of the Dickens text and felt that the show failed to live up to the potential it showed in the early scenes for some sort of passionate social message akin to those found in the original novel: “The opening bodes well for those craving a darker, more David Lean-like vision. Pitiless weather: thunder, lightning; a pregnant girl collapsing before the workhouse gates silhouetted on the scrim. But there’s so little real darkness in what follows that, by the time…Oliver launched into ‘Where is Love’ [sic], you wonder what he’s whining about” (28). Burchill, a fan of the 1968 film, had resigned herself to the fact that the Palladium would not prove in any way incisive regarding the themes of social injustice: “I love both the book and the film, while thoroughly appreciating what a difference a ! makes. *Oliver!,* the film, has as little to do with Dickens’s novel as *Kiss Me Kate* does with *The Taming of the Shrew.* So I was hardly expecting incisive social comment from the stage show” (14). The portrayal of Fagin here likewise irked those critics who wanted more incisive social commentary and greater fidelity to the original text. Whereas Ron Moody had offered a more Dickensian vision of Fagin by incorporating the character’s Jewishness into
his performance, Pryce’s Fagin lacked this element. Nicholas de Johngh of the *Evening Standard* noted that “There’s scant sense that this Fagin is Jewish. He has the manner of an unlucky Bohemian down on his luck” (19). Benedict Nightingale of the *Times* also found fault with this omission, feeling that the creative team had sacrificed realism and fidelity for political correctness: “Couldn’t Fagin be more, er, Jewish? It is not only Dickens who extends that invitation, but Bart by adding Yiddish rhythms to “Reviewing the Situation” and retaining the repetitive ‘my dear’ of the book. Ron Moody accepted the challenge but Pryce did not and [Jim] Dale does not. Surely there must be a way of respecting an author’s intentions without falling into anti-Semitic caricature—or, in these super-sensitive days, is that too much to ask?” (17). Critics Richard Morrison and Edward Seckerson also touched on this omission.

It is striking to find the issues of social criticism and fidelity at the forefront of several of these reviews, given that these are the same facets of the adaptation that had been virtually ignored by British critics in 1960. Given that *Oliver!* was now thirty-four years old and that the initial mystique of the distinctly British musical had long-since expired, English critics were seemingly more willing to examine the issue of fidelity more closely—that, or maybe *Oliver!* simply had to face a more disillusioned worldview. The *London Times* reviewer noted that “‘Oliver!’ is a 1960s musical. Does anybody remember the 1960s? Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, working class, cocky and swaggering; and Bart’s musical, cheerful, cheeky and basically optimistic, paid homage to a culture that was emerging from being mere local colour to being a part of life” (8–46). Though the show remained enjoyable and relevant for this particular critic, it was, in many ways, the product of a far less cynical, jaded, and skeptical time period.
Nevertheless, other critics were kinder to the Palladium Oliver! Alastair Macaulay described the show as “spectacular” and genuinely moving (W1), while David Lister praised the revival as “splendid” (par. 1). Lister attended an opening night celebration following the show where an emotional Lionel Bart described his feelings on the rebirth of his masterpiece: “It was a wonderful evening” (qtd. in Lister, par. 8). For certain, the reviews of the less enthusiastic critics could not put a damper on the celebratory aspects inherent in the return of Oliver! to the West End. Furthermore, these reviews also did little to dissuade audiences from coming out in droves to see Oliver! The revival ran for 1,352 performances and launched a successful tour of the UK and Canada in the years that followed. Throughout the Palladium run, a parade of gifted actors were seen in the role of Fagin including Pryce, Dale, Russ Abbot, Robert Lindsay, and Barry Humphries, who had originated the role of Sowerberry in the 1960 West End production.

By the time Oliver! closed, it had broken Palladium records in terms of the length of its run (Morley and Leon 164). Thus, Oliver! was established as “the most successfully revived of all home-grown British musicals since the war” (Morley and Leon 164). It was through the Palladium adaptation that Cameron Mackintosh accomplished his goal of securing Oliver!’s future. The show that had helped to start his career now owed him a distinct debt of gratitude for the almost paternal care that he had shown toward it; in a strange way, Mackintosh had become Oliver!’s Mr. Brownlow. No longer would Oliver! be bound by the tenets of the original stage versions, tenets dictated largely by the Kenny set. It was a new Oliver! for a new era in the realm of musical theater, one defined by cinematic spectacle as opposed to Brechtian experimentalism.
Another ten years have passed since the closing of the Palladium production, and it is not surprising that, once more, Mackintosh’s attention has returned to his beloved Oliver! The Drury Lane version of Oliver!, which will begin previews in December 2008 and open formally in January 2009, is the latest chapter in the stage history of Oliver!, and moreover, in Mackintosh’s involvement with the musical (though these two separate elements have become virtually integrated). Comic actor Rowan Atkinson’s turn as Fagin will mark a transition for the popular performer, now most widely known for his signature comedic role Mr. Bean. Nevertheless, Atkinson is not a complete stranger to the role: “I had been thinking for some time about returning to the stage, and the idea of the role of Fagin has long intrigued me. I even had the part in a school production” (qtd. in Fletcher, par. 4). Burn Gorman, recently seen as the irrepressible Mr. Guppy in the 2005 BBC adaptation of Bleak House, will take on the decidedly darker Dickensian role of Bill Sikes; veteran stage actress Rosemary Leach will play Mrs. Bedwin; the diversely-talented Julian Glover will portray Mr. Brownlow; and Julian Bleach, co-creator of the award-winning Shockheaded Peter, will play both Mr. Sowerberry and Dr. Grimwig.

Of course, the primary buzz regarding the casting of this particular revival relates to the characters of Nancy and Oliver. The premiere of I’d Do Anything on BBC One in March of `08 marked the beginning of an entertaining and highly publicized talent competition to find a set of unknowns to take on the lead roles for the big-budget revival of Oliver! I’d Do Anything was the third in a series of these West End talent shows produced by the BBC, the previous two being How Do You Solve A Problem Like Maria? and Any Dream Will Do; the winners of these two shows were given the chance to play the roles of Maria in The Sound of Music and Joseph in Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat respectively. Lord
Andrew Lloyd Webber has contributed heavily to all three programs, serving as a panel judge on all of these competitions.\(^\text{12}\)

Auditions for *I’d Do Anything* were held throughout the United Kingdom in early 2008; following initial auditions, callbacks, and a period of training and evaluation, a group of thousands was whittled down to a few dozen. By the time the show started its run on BBC One, there were only twelve potential Nancys and twelve potential Olivers set to compete for the coveted roles in the revival. The competition revolved around both groups participating in chorus and solo numbers and being evaluated by a panel of judges, including Lloyd Webber, Mackintosh, John Barrowman, Denise Van Outen, and Barry Humphries. As in most reality TV show competitions, audience members were allowed to vote on their favorites via telephone in hopes of getting them through to the finals, though in this particular show, audience voting was limited to the role of Nancy—the judges took on the job of selecting three of the boys to play Oliver. Every week, the two Nancys with the least amount of votes would compete in a sing-off, and Lloyd Webber would select which one to remain in the competition.

Dividing the show between the Nancys and the Olivers gave one the impression that the show itself could really be split into two separate entities: the Nancy contest was more of a traditional reality show, as the candidates competed in singing competitions and were dependent on audience votes, while the Olivers participated in a wide variety of activities and excursions outside of the live studio where they were evaluated by Lloyd Webber and Mackintosh. When they did sing in front of the studio audience, it was in group numbers.

\(^{12}\) Lloyd Webber’s involvement in the case of *I’d Do Anything* varied slightly from his previous contributions. Whereas the composer was actually the producer of the revivals of *Sound of Music* and *Joseph* that were staged in conjunction with the reality shows, he is not involved in this capacity with the revival of *Oliver!* Nevertheless, the new revival of *Oliver!* will open at a theatre owned by Lloyd Webber’s Really Useful Group.
though the semi-finalists chosen each week would be given the privilege of leading the group for that particular episode. For certain, the Oliver competition came across as less intense than the Nancy competition, though it was clear that the twelve endearing boys competing for the title role were just as excited about the contest as their older, female counterparts. The opening to each individual episode often proved a highlight as it would feature all of the competitors performing a song from Oliver! together. The liveliness of Bart’s score remains fundamental to the musical’s appeal. Given that millions of people in the UK tuned in for the I’d Do Anything finale, the early hype for the Drury Lane revival is strong. Between the success of the Palladium version of Oliver! and the excitement surrounding this latest production, it is hard to believe that there were ever any fears of Oliver! becoming obsolete.

When Lionel Bart passed away in 1999, the world lost one of the truly great talents in the history of British musical theater—a man whose contributions to the British musical were central to its evolution. Thanks to the efforts of Cameron Mackintosh and Sam Mendes, however, there is little reason for concern about the endurance of Bart’s magnum opus: Oliver!’s legacy seems assured. If “Where is Love?” is indeed the central unifying thread to Oliver!, than the question has already been answered in the public’s love for this timeless treasure of the British musical stage.
SECTION II
History

In the *Cambridge Companion to the Musical*, John Snelson reaffirms that the number of canonical English musicals produced from the 1940s through the 1960s pales in comparison to the number of American musicals which have endured. As discussed in Chapter 1, historical factors clearly played a significant part in this disparity:

World War II interrupted the development of British musical theater and led to a post-war dichotomy between the need to take up again and develop the interrupted past as an assertion of continuity and the need to embrace change in a world that could not be the same again. In musical theatre the British writers understandably tended to address the former need, while the imported American shows addressed for a British audience the latter….Not surprisingly, the traffic in shows across the Atlantic was almost exclusively one-way as the British works had a social and political dimension alongside a general national mood that was not interesting or even comprehensible to a Broadway audience. (Snelson 118)

Though British musicals could certainly attain success in their native country, these shows usually held little interest for American audiences—conversely, American shows repeatedly captivated British audiences. As discussed in Section I, *Oliver!* (1960) proved a unique exception to these trends, as Lionel Bart’s show attained success in both Britain and the United States, a testament to the enduring attractiveness of Dickens both at home and abroad, as well as the infinite charm of Bart’s music. Moreover, the success of *Oliver!* revealed that the theatrical elements of Dickens’s fiction could be effectively translated into the form of the musical. By adopting an American model and adapting one of Britain’s greatest icons to fit into that specific theatrical format through experimentation with traditionally British styles of music, Lionel Bart carved out a place for himself in the annals of British theatrical history,
as the success of *Oliver!* surpassed that of any English musical up to that point. *Oliver!* likewise inaugurated the period of the modern Dickensian musical. Bart’s show paved the way for countless other musical adaptations of Boz’s works, and almost all of the creative minds behind these subsequent adaptations tried to duplicate the success of *Oliver!* by approaching the source material with Bart’s methodology.

*Oliver!* was hardly the first version of a Dickens novel to employ stage music, however. Ever since the Victorian era, playwrights have incorporated songs into dramatic versions of Dickens’s works, though the conventions of the “musical” as it existed in the Victorian period varied widely from the conventions that Bart employed in writing *Oliver!* Chapter 5 addresses the Dickensian musical from a historical perspective that coincidentally spans the entire spectrum of the Dickens canon, from *The Pickwick Papers* to *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.

In 1963, a musical version of *Pickwick Papers* simply entitled *Pickwick* premiered in the West End. Wolf Mankowitz wrote the libretto for this adaptation of Dickens’s first novel, while Cyril Ornadel and Leslie Bricusse worked on the music and lyrics respectively. It is somewhat ironic that *Oliver!* preceded *Pickwick* as the first hit modern musical based on a Dickens novel given that *Twist* was actually Dickens’s second novel and *Pickwick Papers* his first. Nevertheless, it is clear that the success of *Oliver!* played a role in the gestation of *Pickwick*.

Though *Pickwick* was the first modern musical adaptation of *Pickwick Papers*, it was hardly the first theatrical adaptation of this novel to employ music. Like *Twist*, *Pickwick Papers* was adapted for the stage numerous times in Dickens’s own era. Furthermore, many of the hack playwrights who adapted *Pickwick Papers* in the Victorian period incorporated
songs into their adaptations, exploring the musical potential of Dickens’s characters.

Bricusse and Ornadel’s *Pickwick* is thus the descendant of numerous musical treatments of Dickens’s very first novel, including W.T. Moncrieff’s infamous adaptation, *Sam Weller*, which premiered before Boz had completed the final chapters of his novel. The haphazard use of music in this Victorian stage show is a distinct contrast to the meticulously organized musical score of *Pickwick*, for *Sam Weller*, like virtually all of the Dickensian “musicals” produced in the nineteenth century, is written in the British tradition of the eighteenth-century ballad opera. Thus, *Pickwick* marked the culmination of one historical trend in musical theater, and the commencement of another. By following the pattern established by Bart with *Oliver!*; Ornadel and Bricusse created a distinct shift from the early musical adaptations of Dickensian novels, most of which were heavily inspired by the ballad opera, to a modern, integrated book musical format—a decidedly more American style of musical theater.

At the opposite end of both the historical and creative spectrums is *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. As Dickens’s final (albeit incomplete) novel, *Edwin Drood* holds an important place in the author’s canon. Boz’s writing style and worldview changed so significantly over the course of his career that it seems almost impossible to believe that the creator of the merry world of Mr. Pickwick is the same author who conceived the ominous city of Cloisterham.

The divergent themes, tones, and topics of Dickens’s first and last novels can help illuminate the evolution of the author’s writing style over the course of his career, but they can likewise be used as criteria for evaluating the suitability and unsuitability of various novels in the Dickens canon for dramatic, and, by extension, musical adaptation. While the works of Dickens’s early period have proven more popular sources for adaptations than the
works of his middle and later periods, the fact that there have been musical versions of
Dickens’s first and last novel is another sign of the sheer longevity and adaptability of his
texts. *Pickwick Papers* and *Edwin Drood* are two incredibly different novels, and yet, they
were both transformed into successful musicals: this despite the fact that *Edwin Drood*, as an
obscure and unfinished murder mystery, seems a highly unlikely source for a popular
Broadway musical. Nevertheless, Rupert Holmes’s adaptation of Dickens’s novel, first
produced on Broadway in 1985, remains one of the most well-known and oft-produced
musical adaptations of the author’s work, second perhaps only to *Oliver!* itself. However, if
*Oliver!* epitomizes the traditional, integrated approach of the golden age of the American
musical to a Dickensian source, then *Drood* epitomizes the more conceptual approach of the
70s and 80s. While the format used by Holmes is still American, it is less evocative of the
traditional giants of American musical theater such as Rodgers and Hammerstein, or Lerner
and Loewe. Rather, *Drood* bears the mark of experimentalists such as Stephen Sondheim,
John Kander, and Fred Ebb.

Interestingly, Holmes’s conceptual approach allows him to place tremendous emphasis on
traditional English culture. Just as Bart was able to preserve the Englishness of Dickens
through his employment of traditional British performance styles, Holmes preserves that
same Englishness by grounding his adaptation completely in the tradition of the Victorian
music hall. Strikingly, Holmes’s adaptation comes across as even more historically British
than Ornadel and Bricusse’s, for while their utilization of the American book musical format
places some limits on the Dickensian elements of *Pickwick*, Holmes’s concept musical
format breaks down these historical and cultural barriers. Consequently, Holmes’s
willingness to take creative risks in the adaptation of Dickens’s novel for the musical stage
allows him to negotiate the boundaries between two different historical foundations as he creates a modern American concept musical framed in the tradition of the Victorian music hall.

It is fitting to discuss *Sam Weller*, *Pickwick*, and *Drood* in the same chapter for several reasons. Firstly, the sources for these musicals take us from the very beginning to the very end of Dickens’s career. Secondly, comparing these three shows allows for a greater appreciation of the evolution of the Dickensian musical as trends in the musical theater shifted over time. Clearly, the most interesting connection between these musicals lies in the historical and cultural issues that connect back to the larger contexts in which the adaptations were produced. An intriguing historical dialogue ultimately emerges from a comparison between the traditions of the ballad opera, as represented by *Sam Weller*, the format of the integrated musical, as epitomized by *Pickwick*, and the medium of the concept musical, as exemplified by *Drood*. Whereas the British ballad opera format of *Sam Weller* prevents music from playing a significant role in supplementing the Dickensian narrative, the integrated book musical format of *Pickwick* relies heavily on music to tell the story while simultaneously sacrificing some of the traditional Englishness of the source material by working in an American format. *Drood* manages to reconcile these historical and cultural differences due largely to the concept musical format utilized by Holmes, a clear product of the era in which he was working.
Chapter 5
From Pickwick to Drod – The Evolution of the Dickensian Musical

The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club is the lightest of Dickens’s major works. Despite some serious moments, the overall tenor of the text remains perpetually optimistic.

George J. Worth asserts that given the blithe tone of the novel, along with the absence of true villainy, there is practically no melodrama in The Pickwick Papers.¹ The merry world of Mr. Pickwick and his friends seems inhospitable to melodrama, for, “in this kind of moral setting, melodrama cannot flourish. When good is amiable, not a little silly, and decidedly unheroic rather than eloquently assertive, and evil is sly and scheming and (in the case of Jingle) downright entertaining rather than uncompromisingly villainous, there can be no serious encounter between them” (35). Nevertheless, the absence of the emotional extremes discussed in the Overture does not render this novel less suitable for musical treatment than the more melodramatic works in the Dickens canon. The uproarious humor of The Pickwick Papers is suggestive of several of the conventions of musical comedy, particularly given the boisterous qualities of the lead characters. From Mr. Pickwick’s charming naiveté, to Sam and Tony Weller’s droll cynicism, to Jingle’s riotous garrulity, Pickwick Papers is full of its own excesses, all of which are played up for comical purposes. The distinctive uses of language by various characters throughout the novel also seem somehow musical, as if each individual is singing his own song. Given the peculiarities of Mr. Pickwick and his

¹ Worth mentions the scene in the Fleet featuring the man ruined by Chancery as the most melodramatic point in the novel given the poor fellow’s grandiloquence even in his reduced state.
companions, it is little wonder that, even in Dickens’s day, characters from the novel were adapted for the musical stage.

Although “musical theater” as we understand it today did not exist in Dickens’s age, many of the unlicensed adaptations of Dickens’s works produced throughout the nineteenth century featured characters singing songs. William T. Moncrieff’s *Sam Weller, or, The Pickwickians* (1837) features a good deal of singing, and yet, it hardly meets the standards of what we now consider to be a musical. Rather, the adaptation highlights the conventions of the British musical stage in the nineteenth century, several of which stem back to *The Beggar’s Opera* (1728), arguably the forefather of all Western musicals. Moncrieff adopts popular melodies and incorporates them somewhat haphazardly into the play. These songs rarely contain any explicit references to Dickens’s characters or the situations in which they have been placed. Rather, they are used simply to entertain. This lack of unity between the songs and the narrative is a convention which would dominate musical theater from the eighteenth century onward.

Conversely, Leslie Bricusse and Cyril Ornadel’s *Pickwick* (1963), written over a century later, epitomizes the integrated book musical. Songs are placed strategically throughout the piece and each character who sings has a reason for singing in the context of the scene. The songs in this show are more than simple decorations or diversions. Rather, as in Lionel Bart’s *Oliver!* (1960), each song serves a specific function; there is never a sense that the characters are singing just for the sake of bursting into song. Like Bart, Bricusse and Ornadel were British artists adapting a distinctly British source for an American genre: the writers’ integrated musical approach to *Pickwick* is evocative of the techniques employed throughout the golden age of the American musical. Their methodology is thus far removed
from the techniques employed by Moncrieff in *Sam Weller*, an adaptation which, because of its connection to the tradition of the ballad opera, retains more explicitly British characteristics in terms of its musical format.

Whereas the musicality of *The Pickwick Papers* seems fairly obvious, the musicality of Dickens’s final novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, is far less palpable. Several textual guides on writing for musical theater stress that mystery stories are poor sources for musical adaptations. Allen Cohen and Steven Rosenhaus lay especial emphasis on this matter, as they assert that certain genres, like mysteries, simply do not translate well to the musical stage: “As for mysteries, they are inherently unsuitable for musicalization because the essence of a mystery story is that no character, except perhaps a detective, is really what they seem. This means that any character for whom the audience has started to care could turn out to be quite a different person” (38). In musicals, we assume that characters who sing solo are being sincere in the feelings that they convey through music. These issues regarding the mystery genre and its (in)compatibility with the musical form would have created several problems for Rupert Holmes, the writer and composer of *Drood* (1985), if he had approached the project with the intent of creating a book musical based on Dickens’s final novel. However, the preface to the *Drood* libretto reveals that writing an integrated musical based on Dickens’s final novel was never the author’s objective. In this foreword, Holmes states that his play “was never intended to be a serious Dickensian adaptation,” but rather, was conceived as a “springboard for a series of theatrical moments and events, using a literary curiosity as a trampoline” (v). As opposed to using the book show format of

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2 The title of the show was shortened from *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* to *Drood* over the course of its initial Broadway run, and it is still licensed under this abridged title to this day.
*Pickwick*, Holmes opts to structure his show as a concept musical framed around the Victorian music hall.

An analysis of these three very different adaptations, each one the product of a distinct age in the history of musical theater, can help to reveal certain historical and cultural patterns in the evolution of the Dickensian musical; the historical contexts here are important to consider, for while the ballad opera technique utilized by Moncrieff helps to create a traditionally British framework for his musical, the integrated musical format used by Bricusse and Ornadel is decidedly more modern and American. Holmes is able to reconcile these different historical and cultural traditions through his use of the concept musical format in *Drood*, for although the model he employs is both postmodern and American, the conceptual frame he creates for his adaptation is British and classical. Thus, Holmes, like Bart before him, succeeds in combining the artistry of the American musical with the traditions of British music-hall culture. Whereas the earlier adaptations of *Pickwick Papers* fall into distinct historical categories, Holmes’s conceptual approach allows for a blurring of the lines between musical eras and transatlantic cultures.

The lack of copyright laws in Dickens’s age made the piracy of his works inevitable, particularly due to the mentality of most playwrights in the nineteenth century. Theaters were dependent on audiences to turn a profit, as patronage was at an all-time low (Rowell 1). Thus, the playwrights of the age were more focused on writing entertaining plays that would draw large crowds rather than creating meaningful works of art. As George Rowell writes, “the playwright’s place in the Victorian theatre was, at the outset, that of handyman to the company. He existed to make their performance possible, rather than they to interpret his work to an audience….No other period in English theatre history illustrates so clearly the fact
that a play exists fully only in performance” (2). Given the emphasis placed on specific performances, it is little wonder that so few plays from the Victorian era have endured. It is likewise understandable why Dickens was such a popular target for piracy: what better way to turn a quick profit than to dramatically recreate scenes from the works of a successful novelist?

W.T. Moncrieff’s *Sam Weller, or The Pickwickians* debuted in 1837, before Boz had even completed his novel. Though the play served its purpose of attracting an audience, it was immediately reviled by many of Dickens’s friends and contacts. John Forster wrote a scathing review of the adaptation soon after it premiered, and, in one of the earliest critical studies of Dickens and the theater, S.J. Adair Fitz-Gerald labels the play as “a most villainous concoction” (80). Though Dickens tolerated many of the unlicensed adaptations produced over the course of his career, Moncrieff’s adaptation was particularly grating for the young author, and the play irked Boz enough to inaugurate a public dispute between the two men.3

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3 Dickens’s supercilious disdain for Moncrieff would continue throughout his early career and culminate in a scathing satire of the playwright in *Nicholas Nickleby* when Nicholas meets Snittle Timberry. Nicholas sardonically compares hacks like Timberry to Shakespeare, in that both relied on previously created material for their shows:

…whereas he brought within the magic circle of his genius, traditions peculiarly adapted for his purpose, and turned familiar things into constellations which should enlighten the world for ages, you drag within the magic circle of your dullness, subjects not at all adapted to the purposes of the stage, and debase as he exalted. For instance, you take the uncompleted books of living authors, fresh from their hands, wet from the press, cut, hack, and carve them to the powers and capacities of your actors, and the capability of your theatres, finish unfinished works, hastily and crudely vamp up ideas not yet worked out by their original projector, but which have doubtless cost him many thoughtful days and sleepless nights; by a comparison of incidents and dialogue, down to the very last word he may have written a fortnight before, do your utmost to anticipate his plot—all this without his permission, and against his will. (727-728)

Moncrieff was eventually prompted to write a rebuttal:

Great as [Dickens’] talents are, he is not to fancy himself “Sir Oracle,” and think that when he speaks no dog should “bark”; he should not attempt to “bestride us like a Colossus,” and grumble that we “poor petty mortals should seek to creep between his legs.” With all possible good feeling, I would beg to hint to Mr. Dickens that depreciating the talents of another is but a shallow and envious way of attempting to raise one’s own. (qtd. in Woolcott 232)
Despite its fairly obvious limitations, Moncrieff’s adaptation can serve as a time capsule for the modern reader. The playwright’s use of music throughout the piece is particularly interesting from a historical point of view, as it brings to light the predominant function of songs in plays of the Victorian era. Although Sam Weller hardly qualifies as a musical, it is still a play with music and songs. The placement and use of these songs throughout the adaptation reveals how the conventions of the early musical stage diverge significantly from the conventions of the modern integrated musical. Furthermore, Moncrieff was writing in a distinctly British tradition through his employment of the conventions of the ballad opera.

The musical breakdown of Sam Weller is simple. In almost every case, a lighthearted air of some kind is incorporated into a random scene in the adaptation, usually exerting zero influence on the story. Though the sheet music to these songs is not included in the surviving script, it is clear that all of these airs were simply popular melodies from the era—no original music was created for the piece. The placement of the songs is haphazard throughout the adaptation, as there is never any sort of buildup toward the numbers. Rather, the characters randomly begin singing at arbitrary moments in the play. In most cases, the lyrics are modified so as to make a passing reference to the stage play, but there are few explicit allusions to Mr. Pickwick’s adventures. The purpose of the songs is simply to entertain the audience.

The first number begins just after Mr. Pickwick hires Sam as his manservant and invites the conniving Jingle to accompany the Pickwickians to Rochester. The song is sung to the melody of “Vive le Roi” and the lyrics are modified to describe the Pickwickians’ journey. This modification gives the song a decidedly more particularized feel than most of the other numbers in the play, but the fact remains that its basic placement is random. The moment in
the play where the song appears does not seem to warrant any sort of interlude from a narrative point of view; instead, the Pickwickians begin singing simply for the sake of singing. This convention epitomizes the use of music throughout the adaptation. Scene II begins with a song sung by Isabella, Emily, and Rachael Wardle entitled “Nice Young Maidens.” The song has no real influence on the plot, nor does it help to define the specific characters of the girls and their aunt; as with the first song sung by the Pickwickians, it is simply a lighthearted air sung to entertain an audience. Perhaps there is no better illustration of this random use of music throughout the play than in the final song of the third scene, as Sam Weller sings the infamous minstrel song “Jim Crow.” Though the lyrics are modified slightly, the main chorus is retained: “Wheel about and turn about/And jump jist so/Laughing at their silly rout/He jumps Jim Crow!” (8). The idea of Dickens’s Sam Weller, who epitomizes Cockney wit, singing a “Jim Crow” song is ludicrous, but simultaneously, Sam’s character here is a negligible factor; Moncrieff simply wanted to incorporate the song into the play and he decided to use Sam as the singer—he might just as easily have chosen Jingle, as the personality of the singer has absolutely no connection to the song being sung.

The rest of the score plays out very similarly, as popular songs are incorporated into the show and sung simply to entertain the audience. Several Christmas carols are sung during the holiday scenes at Dingley Dell, while popular political ballads, such as “Hurrah! for the bonnets of blue!” are sung during the scene in which Mr. Pickwick visits Eatanswill to witness the Slumkey vs. Fizkin election. Scene III, which focuses on the armed forces drills in Rochester, contains two brief military airs entitled “Follow the Drum,” and “Oh they march’d through the Town” which, though thematically appropriate, bear no relevance to the plot or the characters. So superfluous are all of these airs to the overall narrative of the play.
that the scenes would play out in entirely the same way even if the songs were excised from the libretto.

Moncrieff’s technique of borrowing popular music and adapting it to suit his needs seems to epitomize the way in which he approached playwriting. It is somehow fitting that the playwright would utilize popular music in this fashion given the fact that he was utilizing Dickens’s text in the same way: borrowing elements from something embedded in the popular culture of the day and modifying those elements to serve his purposes. Moncrieff was hardly the first playwright to utilize stage music in this fashion, however. Rather, the playwright’s use of music in *Sam Weller* is traceable back to the eighteenth-century ballad opera.

Edmond Gagey describes the ballad opera as an irreverent newcomer that took the London stage by storm. To write ballad operas, composers “ransacked the plays and themes of the past as well as the song collections in order to satisfy the prevailing taste” (3). The constant reuse of these popular tunes contributed to the early demise of the genre, as melodies were recycled so often that the novelty quickly wore off. Nevertheless, the popularity of certain ballad operas, most notably, John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera*, was unquestionable. *The Beggar’s Opera* is a curious mixture of the conventions of the Newgate novel, Swiftian satire, and of course, popular music of the period. This particular ballad opera is also noteworthy for its burlesque of Italian opera, as it openly mocks the perceived pretensions of this foreign art form: “English musical theatre had always resisted the deliberately dramatic style of Italian opera in favour of simple lyricism, and from *The Beggar’s Opera* (1728) onwards, had itself been happy to draw on traditional material” (Bennett 3). Though ballad operas frequently adopted melodies from Italian operas, they simultaneously lampooned the
“effeminacy” of this genre. In a review of *The Beggar’s Opera* written by Jonathan Swift, the satirist praises the piece for its parody of Italian opera: “This comedy likewise exposes, with great justice, that taste for Italian music among us, which is wholly unsuitable to a Northern climate and the genius of the people, whereby we are overrun with Italian effeminacy” (qtd. in Fiske 97). Clearly, there was something patriotic about Gay’s piece despite its low subject matter. Much as the modern musical would prove an inherently American art form, the ballad opera was inherently British.

Various theater scholars are hesitant to acknowledge the ballad opera or the operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan as precursors to the modern musical—to do so would imply that one of the few indigenous American art forms is actually rooted in the artistic traditions of Britain and Europe. Scott Miller dismisses the links between these early forms of musical theater and the modern musical, as he insists that the musical is quintessentially American: “Musical theatre as we define it today…was invented in America, it was largely developed in America….There are British authors who declare categorically that the Brits invented musical theatre, but they’re talking about operetta, ballad opera, and other such things” (6). Conversely, other texts on the history of the genre emphasize the aforementioned links, and cite *The Beggar’s Opera* as an important precursor to the modern musical. Denny Flinn states that *The Beggar’s Opera* “begins the history of the musical-comedy” (56), and stresses that Gay was one of the key figures in the development of what we now know as the American musical. Kurt Ganzl reconciles these two viewpoints, asserting that the trends started by the ballad opera allowed for the gradual development of original music being written for the stage, which was essential to the emergence of what we would today define as “musical theater”: 
During the second half of the eighteenth century and the first years of the nineteenth century, much of what was produced as musical theatre entertainment followed the lines that had been established in these early years. Little by little, however, the popular pieces began to undergo important changes. Most importantly, they began regularly rather than exceptionally to take in original rather than recomposed music: music that was of a “popular” bent, in the same style as the favorite songs and tunes previously used as musical-theater song-fodder, but freshly baked in a virtual imitation of the pasticcio songs. (Musical 12)

Despite the new innovations inspired by the popularity of the ballad opera, however, music remained a tangential element as opposed to a fully incorporated component. As in Sam Weller, the music written for most of the plays of this period was meant to add to the overall entertainment value of the piece—it did not contribute significantly to the plot or characters. Aside from a relatively small number of songs that make reference to Polly Peachum or Macheath, very few of the ballads in The Beggar's Opera explicitly allude to members of the cast. Rather, the songs that are sung throughout the play address topics relating to general groups of people: wenches, lawyers, criminals, and so on. These generalities contribute to the idea that the songs are amusing airs meant to entertain, as opposed to essential musical numbers that are fundamental to the definition of the characters and the story. Coupled with this lack of specificity is the absence of dramatic necessity; the music never seems indispensable. Consequently, the ballad opera combined popular music and theater, but it did not integrate the two elements.4 While ballad operas may have helped to create the possibility for the integrated stage musical, the two art forms are very different.

The movement toward a more consistent and structured musical emerged in America in the early twentieth century, as the musical form itself evolved. With the arrival of shows such as Show Boat and Oklahoma!, the concept of the book musical was finally crystallized through the efforts of Jerome Kern, Richard Rodgers, and Oscar Hammerstein II. In an

4 Julian Mates claims that in a ballad opera “music must hold a secondary place and must be able to be omitted without spoiling the plot” (141).
integrated musical, neither the libretto nor the score is privileged. Instead, the two are linked together in a spirit of cooperation: songs grow out of the plot and the characters, and thus serve to reinforce the qualities of both these narrative elements. Unlike the musicals of the past, there was no longer a sense of numbers being pasted in solely to divert and entertain. Simultaneously, in contrast to pieces like The Beggar’s Opera which could be staged successfully while leaving out the songs, the narrative of an integrated musical is incomplete without the music to support the story. Whereas The Beggar’s Opera can still make for a fully logical play without the musical interludes, an integrated show like Carousel falls apart without Billy’s “Soliloquy.”

If Sam Weller epitomizes several of the conventions of the Dickensian musical before the advent of the integrated format, Pickwick, like Oliver!, exemplifies the standards of the modern Dickensian musical. The use of music throughout the adaptation is logical and coherent, and the libretto, score, and lyrics all work together to contribute to the presentation of the narrative. Whereas the songs in Sam Weller are interpolated arbitrarily, the songs in Pickwick are meticulously laid out so that each number serves some sort of function.

Several of the songs in Pickwick are used either to move the plot forward or to introduce scenes. As in the Moncrieff adaptation, the Christmas episodes and Eatanswill scenes from Dickens’s novel are retained. Furthermore, both versions of the novel employ music in these scenes. While Moncrieff employs traditional Christmas carols and political ballads, tweaking the lyrics slightly, Bricusse and Ornadel write entirely new songs. What is more significant, however, is the function of these songs in their respective contexts. In Sam Weller, the songs are thematically relevant, but they exert no influence on the drama itself. The plot seems to stand still while the characters take a moment to shift from speech to song.
In *Pickwick*, the shift is much more organic, and the songs are not used as decorations. Furthermore, time is not standing still during these numbers. Rather, the songs are used to move the story forward. “That’s What I’d Like for Christmas” is employed to transition from the Fleet Prison scenes to the flashback scenes which dominate the adaptation. Simultaneously, the number helps to create a smooth shift from one setting to another. The Eatanswill number, “A Hell of an Election,” provides a boisterous opening to the play’s second act while simultaneously establishing a new conflict. The organic and operational function of music in *Pickwick* is far removed from the haphazard and static function of music in *Sam Weller*.

The disparate use of music in relation to the characters in these two adaptations is also an important contrast. A great many of the songs in *Pickwick* are used for characterization purposes, and several characters are introduced and defined through music. As mentioned in the Overture, Dickens’s method of revealing the basic personalities of his characters instantaneously is well-suited for musical adaptation given the importance of introducing characters quickly in this particular genre. When Mr. Pickwick and Sam first appear in *Pickwick*, Sam sets about trying to cheer his master by singing a song entitled “Talk,” where he stresses the importance of learning how to talk one’s way out of awkward situations. The animated melody, comic tone, and witty lyrics are all befitting of Dickens’s character, and the song serves the same function as Sam’s “wellerisms”—to present the Cockney wit and street smarts of the young manservant:

> If you’re stepping out in St. James’s Park  
> With some sweet young widder ready for a lark!  
> She asks you to home to tea—  
> Then a knock comes at the door—  
> Her husband’s very much alive and six foot three or four!
You’ll have to
Talk your way out of it!—
Talk your way out of it!—
Talk around about a bit,
But talk!

Or he’ll make mincemeat of you! (7)

This comic air is clearly a more appropriate anthem for Sam than a “Jim Crow” song, and it is simultaneously far more relevant to the plot. Whereas the songs from the Moncrieff adaptation rarely serve any purpose in the context of the story, this song accomplishes many different goals: it introduces Sam’s comical personality, it characterizes Sam’s relationship with Mr. Pickwick, and it expresses hope that Sam will be able to get his employer out of trouble. Songs can clearly achieve a great deal more in *Pickwick* than they can in *Sam Weller*, which reveals the increasing importance of music on the stage following the development of the American musical.

As in all successful integrated musicals, the character driven songs in *Pickwick* are specific to the individual doing the singing and pertinent to the action taking place onstage. When Mr. Jingle is introduced and sings “A Bit of a Character,” the odd syncopation to the song mirrors the character’s staccato method of speaking, while the lyrics convey his roguish personality. Later, when Mr. Pickwick sings the most famous song from this particular show, “If I Ruled the World,” his reasons for doing so are clear. Furthermore, he sings a song that epitomizes his naïve yet hopeful worldview: “If I ruled the world/Every day would be the first day of Spring—/Every heart would have a new song to sing—/And we’d sing/Of the joy every morning would bring” (52). While the songs in *Sam Weller* are virtually interchangeable, a song in *Pickwick* which is sung by Sam would lose all of its meaning if it were sung by Mr. Pickwick or Jingle. This fact is another key facet of the integrated musical.
As Frederick Engel asserts in *Words with Music*, “each song must say what only this specific character *can* say, not just loosely what *any* character (for example) in love might say. It is the duty of the lyricist to find material in this particular character in this particular play in this particular scene which has not been said again and again by every character in every previous play. This requires genuine creativity, thought, patience, and invention” (Engel’s emphases, 156). It is clear that Moncrieff was lacking in these qualities when he wrote *Sam Weller*; the recycled music, trite lyrics, and lack of specificity exemplify the absence of such things as creativity, thought, patience, and invention.

The contrasts between *Sam Weller* and *Pickwick* highlight the dissimilar functions of stage music in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries while simultaneously conveying a sense of the movement toward an integrated musical. Combined with these historical issues are the cultural concerns raised in the two adaptations. Both shows are the result of British writers adapting a canonical British author for the British stage. Of the two works, however, *Sam Weller* retains a more overtly British identity in terms of the function of its score. Written in the tradition of the ballad opera and featuring melodies from popular British ballads, *Sam Weller* is clearly representative of early nineteenth-century British culture; furthermore, even those songs that are not based on British melodies, such as “Jim Crow,” can help to paint a historical portrait of the Victorian musical stage. In comparison to *Sam Weller*, *Pickwick* marks a clear transition from the disjointed works of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain to the unified shows of the golden age of the American musical.

As discussed in Section I, maintaining the British elements of the Dickensian source material while translating it into an American form of entertainment presents certain difficulties. Like Bart before them, Cyril Ornadel and Leslie Bricusse were faced with a
precarious balancing act. By writing an integrated score for this adaptation of *Pickwick Papers*, the composer and lyricist had to modify their British source to fit the tenets of what had historically been perceived as an American entertainment genre while simultaneously preserving the definitive Dickensian qualities, almost all of which are inherently associated with English culture, that had made it so popular a source to begin with. Though Bricusse and Ornadel, like Bart, attempted to maintain the Englishness of the source by utilizing traditional British music, their efforts were not as concerted as Bart’s. For certain, there are several music-hall style songs in *Pickwick*, most notably, those sung by Sam. Nevertheless, the more tangential incorporation of music-hall songs in the Ornadel/Bricusse adaptation diverges from Bart’s fundamental use of music-hall culture throughout *Oliver!*, whereas the music hall is essential to Bart’s representation of the thieves’ den and exerts a direct influence over the dramatic and thematic presentation of the characters and situations, the music-hall elements of *Pickwick* are limited mainly to a single character. Bart’s utilization of music-hall music in his adaptation seems more indispensable, and consequently, the Englishness of the Dickensian source is more clearly accentuated.

The episodic quality to the plot of *The Pickwick Papers* also raises several questions about any attempt to adapt the novel for a dramatic presentation: what is the best approach for creating a dramatic narrative from such a fragmented story? Which episodes should be cut and which should be incorporated into the adaptation? In what order should the episodes be placed? Each of these issues is legitimate and *Sam Weller* and *Pickwick* both provide interesting examples of how their respective creators went about solving such quandaries. Whereas the differences in the scores highlight the differences between the two eras in which the shows were written, the divergences in the scripts are not truly indicative of any
significant historical or cultural differences outside of the musical issues. Nevertheless, the
tighter narrative structure of *Pickwick* is directly connected to the integrated score; the fact
that the songs are not interchangeable means that the episodes in the plot are not
transposable. The storyline thus progresses linearly. This lack of interchangeability is a
distinct contrast between *Pickwick* and *Sam Weller*, and also, between the Bricusse/Ornadel
musical and the original text.

The structure of *Pickwick Papers* has inspired a great deal of critical debate over the years
regarding the genre of the piece. Dickens’s first novel is arguably his most episodic. The
plot is loosely structured and the piece seems to embody many of the qualities associated
with the picaresque works of Tobias Smollet and Henry Fielding (two of Dickens’s most
noteworthy predecessors and influences). The disjointed nature of the text has led some
critics, most notably G.K. Chesterton, to question whether or not *The Pickwick Papers* is
actually a novel. Dickensian scholars have often struggled with the issue of how exactly to
characterize *The Pickwick Papers*, and numerous attempts have been made to delineate an
underlying configuration to the episodes in the novel (and moreover, to explain the
seemingly haphazard incorporation of the various “tales,” such as the “The Convict’s
Return.”) In “Fragmentation in *The Pickwick Papers*,” Anny Sadrin astutely questions the
logic of critics trying to “justify” the novel by arguing that the interpolated tales bear some
sort of significant thematic relevance to the text: “The trouble with these well-intentioned
defenders of Dickensian unity is that they moralize art: unity is good, fragmentation is bad,
they seem to say” (22). Like Chesterton, Sadrin asserts that the true spirit of *Pickwick
Papers* defies any attempts to organize the text into a solid chronological structure. Rather,
the text celebrates the joys of the passing moment.
Creating a coherent dramatization of *The Pickwick Papers* is no easy task given the incredible variety of episodes and the large number of disjointed situations in which the characters are placed. Both Moncrieff and Mankowitz attempt to build a consistent adaptation from a set of highly entertaining but incoherent episodes. Nevertheless, fragmentation contributes to the humor of the novel. As Sadrin points out, the narrator himself seems frustrated with the disjointed structure of the text: “Fragmentation is constantly presented by the narrator as a necessary evil, unsuited to his own taste for stylistic decorum and high flown rhetoric” (“Fragmentation” 27). The narrator’s task as the editor of the Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club can prove difficult, especially when he discovers various holes in his records, but his drawing attention to these omissions and inconsistencies adds to the overall levity of the text.

*Sam Weller* and *Pickwick* both create a less episodic and more unified narrative as is necessitated by the medium of the stage, but whereas *Pickwick* is particularly cohesive thanks to its integrated score, *Sam Weller* retains a greater sense of spontaneity as the musical numbers are utilized much more freely. In his text on the history of the musical, Ganzl describes the major effects of the advent of the integrated musical, stating that “there was as little place for the irrelevant numbers of the ‘interpolated’ kind that had flourished in the early part of the century in the score of a modern musical as there was for the irrelevant performer” (284). His use of the word “interpolated” here is worthy of note given that it is a word which has been applied to Dickens’s first novel many times: the stories inserted throughout the text are often referred to as “interpolated tales.” Consequently, although the musical score to *Pickwick* is infinitely more organized and technically coherent than the score to *Sam Weller*, the very randomness of the songs incorporated into the earlier musical
seems more evocative of the basic tenor of Dickens’s novel. In a sense, the songs take the place of the interpolated tales and serve a similar function: to briefly entertain the audience merely for the sake of diversion. Just as the interpolated tales could be cut from the novel without damaging the story, so could the songs be struck from Sam Weller. Pickwick, as an integrated musical, does not possess the same level of freedom; cutting the songs would render the narrative incoherent. Though Ornadel and Bricusse succeeded in creating an integrated book show, the very process of integration seems at odds with the free-wheeling format of the novel.

The fact that the use of music in Sam Weller seems more analogous to the narrative technique Dickens employed in his first novel certainly does not mean that it is a superior adaptation to Pickwick. Nevertheless, it again emphasizes the historical differences between the two works and how these historical differences can shape the modern cultural appreciation of the shows. The unrestrictive musical structure of Sam Weller, a product of the theatrical conventions of the era in which Dickens himself wrote, once again seems to emphasize the Englishness of the adaptation. The tighter and more linear narrative structure of Pickwick is reflective of the era in which the American-style book show was the dominant form of musical theater.

The contrasts between the structures of these two adaptations also raise interesting points about the format of other musical adaptations of The Pickwick Papers; perhaps the ideal musical version of this particular novel would combine the sophistication of the score to Pickwick with the freedom and improvisational use of songs in Sam Weller. The concept-style approach that Rupert Holmes used when adapting The Mystery of Edwin Drood immediately comes to mind. Drood is not fashioned in the same mold as Oliver! and
*Pickwick*, both traditional book shows, for the narrative is not always linear and the songs are not integrated seamlessly into the story. In fact, *Drood* seems to defy any sort of simple categorization regarding genre and format. Holmes’s preface describes the show as a “series of theatrical moments and events” (v), thus intimating that there is a revue show element to the adaptation, and indeed, the unsystematic tenor of a musical revue is essential to Holmes’s vision. Nevertheless, *Drood* is more than a simple revue show. Despite the composer’s insistence that he did not intend his work to be a straightforward Dickensian adaptation, he remains surprisingly faithful to the narrative of the original novel, and at times, the show is heavily driven by its plot.

This curious balance between a musical revue and a traditional book show is further complicated by the fact that there are elements of the show-within-a-show genre as well. Each actor in the cast of *Drood* plays two characters and it is established that the audience is allegedly watching a group of Victorian music-hall performers acting out scenes from their own recent musical adaptation of Dickens’s incomplete novel. While Dickens’s characters are all essential to the drama that is being presented by the music hall performers, the fictional characters of the music hall performers themselves are also introduced to the audience: the company’s leading man, Clive Paget, is cast in the role of the villainous John Jasper, while the virginal debutante, Deidre Peregrine, steps into the role of Dickensian heroine Rosa Bud. In one of the most creative decisions made by Holmes, Edwin Drood himself is played by one of the music hall’s ingénues, Alice Nutting; thus, the audience is presented with a curious situation in which an actress plays an actress playing a Dickensian hero! The elements of the show-within-a-show genre are essential to Holmes’s adaptation,
but unlike most musicals written in this genre, Holmes declines to take us backstage into the lives of the performers.

*Drood* thus seems to challenge all possible labels. It is clearly not an integrated book show, and yet there is a book element in the musical presentation of Dickens’s mystery story. It is structured like a revue, but it retains too strong a narrative center for it to simply be labeled a revue show. It is presented as a show-within-a-show, but the performers are only introduced as performers and the audience never really learns about their true personalities. *Drood* is best classified as a concept musical, a distinctive genre in musical theater which became prominent in the 1970s and 80s. Instead of a narrative, the concept show is structured around some sort of metaphor or idea, and the music, story, and characters all contribute to the presentation of this idea. Holmes’s central conception is to replicate the atmosphere of a Victorian music hall, and moreover, to celebrate the basic elements of music-hall culture. Ultimately, Holmes’s conceptual approach to the material allows him to reconcile the classically British elements of his project with the tenets of the historical trends in the experimentalist American musical theater of the 1970s and 80s—the combination allows for him to create an American adaptation that is fundamentally more British than *Pickwick*.

*Drood* is a product of its time period. Most theater scholars designate the 1970s as the birth period of the concept musical, and Stephen Sondheim’s *Company* is often described as one of the first examples of this type of musical. Joanne Gordon stresses the correlation between Sondheim’s approach to musical theater and the advent of the concept musical:

Concept, the word coined to describe the form of the Sondheim musical, suggests that all elements of the musical, thematic and presentational, are integrated to suggest a central idea or image….Prior to Sondheim, the musical was built around the plot….The book structure for Sondheim, on the other hand, means the idea. Music, lyric, dance, dialogue,
design, and direction fuse to support a focal thought. A central conceit controls and shapes an entire production, for every aspect of the production is blended and subordinated to a single vision. Form and content cannot really be separated, for one dictates and is dependent on the other. It is for this reason that each of Sondheim’s works is unique. (7-8)

Though often set in opposition to the book musical, the concept musical is actually an integrated art form itself. In fact, it is arguably more unified than the narrative-based book musical, as every single element connects back to one central idea. Rather than simply integrating music into a narrative, the writers of concept shows integrate songs, dialogue, and staging into an overarching theme. This approach is essential to Holmes’s vision, and unsurprisingly, Drood was produced in the wake of some of Sondheim’s most conceptually driven musicals.

The principal concept behind Holmes’s adaptation is the recreation of a Victorian music hall, not only in terms of the staging and performance style, but likewise, in the atmosphere created by the performers. Every element of the musical, including the Dickensian narrative, is integrated into this idea. Consequently, Holmes’s approach allows him to retain the Englishness of the source. Though Ornadel and Bricusse incorporated numerous English elements into the musical score to Pickwick, Pickwick is structured within an American frame, that is, the book musical. While the concept musical is also an American innovation, pioneered by the likes of Sondheim, Kander, and Ebb, the concept used by Holmes is inherently British: the Victorian music-hall setting allows for a greater emphasis on historical English culture. Furthermore, since every single element of the musical is connected back to this concept, Victorian culture—specifically, the Cockney culture emphasized by Bart in Oliver!—is integral to the project. Every character is based on a type or figure that might have been found on the Victorian stage, and every song is meant to evoke some element of
the Victorian music hall. Though Holmes is working in an American form, his experimental vision, a product of the historical moment in which he was writing, allows for an interesting cultural exchange. While *Drood* is arguably the most innovative musical adaptation of a Dickensian novel ever produced, that innovation is attained through a historical dialogue: the concept musical movement of the 70s and 80s allows Holmes to revive the central elements of the Victorian music hall on the modern American stage.

In order to evaluate just how successfully the music-hall concept is executed in *Drood*, a better understanding of Victorian music-hall culture is necessary. The music hall evolved from such ordinary practices as singing in local taverns, and initially, a music hall was little more than a saloon in which the patrons sang together. The emphasis in music-hall culture gradually shifted from drinking to entertainment, as Dagmar Kift writes that: “The music hall can thus be characterized as an institution which was born ‘from below’ (i.e. from the pubs) and was rapidly subjected to a thoroughgoing process of commercialization” (2). Consequently, the music hall quickly became the chief form of entertainment (as well as an important social outlet) for members of the working class.

Music-hall entertainment featured a number of distinctive traits which separated it from traditional theater. One of its most distinguishing characteristics was the presence of an emcee known as the chairman. The chairman was noteworthy for his fine style of dressing and eloquent manner of speaking, and he thus brought an element of class to what was regarded as a lowbrow form of entertainment. Nevertheless, Kift asserts that this persona was largely an in-joke between the emcee and his audience: “But the manner of [the

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5 As discussed in Chapters 2 and 4, both the stage and film versions of *Oliver!* feature representations of early music-hall culture through the staging of the song “Oom-Pah-Pah.” The film version of *Oliver!* presents a particularly early vision of music-hall culture, as Nancy joins in with a group of patrons who are casually singing along to an accordionist’s music; the stage version contains a more formalized music hall, complete with chairman.
chairman’s] introductions and the language of his patter with its satirical exaggeration of middle-class and aristocratic speech patterns made it quite clear that he was at the same time parodying the members of those classes whose dress habits he was imitating” (22). Thus, even the chairman was a performer of sorts.

Alcohol and women, two other key components of the music hall, were simultaneously two of the leading causes behind the controversies associated with music-hall culture. Obviously, the prevalence of alcohol in the halls roused the indignation of those involved in the temperance movement. The woman question was likewise a particularly controversial issue, for London music halls offered exciting new opportunities to women. Not only could females freely interact with their peers in the music hall, but they could also find opportunities for lucrative employment as performers; J.S. Bratton writes that “the halls provided working-class women with a rare opportunity to make their way to independence and even to fortune” (93). These freedoms, coupled with the open discussion of sexuality in music-hall songs, scandalized many in the middle class and quickly led to the music hall being linked to urban prostitution. Nevertheless, there was no law against being a prostitute and visiting a music hall so long as one did not solicit: “The owners of such institutions were only breaking the law if they tolerated prostitutes who were clearly there other than for entertainment or the consumption of alcohol” (Kift 137). As such, proprietors generally accepted the presence of prostitutes—in a way, it was another chance for the working class to undermine middle-class morality. The fact that “fallen women” could mingle with other people as equals reinforced the liberating principles of music-hall culture, much as Nancy and Bet gleefully mock middle-class morality in *Oliver!*
Music was obviously another key element of the Victorian music hall, and comic songs became the central feature in the musical repertoire of the halls’ performers. Most comedic music-hall songs undercut several fundamental elements of Victorian middle-class culture. Whereas the middle class idealized the Victorian home, the retiring female, and the cozy domestic sphere, music-hall songs tended to mock these idealizations through coarse innuendos and satirical lyrics. As mentioned, music-hall culture also took a far more open view of sexuality; according to Kift, “sex—in stark contrast to Victorian middle-class notions—was not taboo but a source of celebration and enjoyment” (37). The most common personalities found on the music-hall stage were often satirical caricatures of certain figures in Victorian society. Popular female figures included the “shy maiden,” a satire of the Victorian angel in the house, and the “naughty girl,” a world-wise character whose innocent style of dressing belied her knowledge of sexual matters (Kift 46-47). Both of these female caricatures contributed to the democratic view of society expounded by the music hall, as the constrictive ideal of the Victorian maiden was shattered.

A final critical component of the music hall as a form of entertainment was the centrality of the audience. Lois Rutherford labels this particular aspect of music-hall culture as the form’s defining trait: “Music-hall entertainment has traditionally been recognized for the special quality of relationship it creates between the audience and performer” (139). A music-hall performer who could successfully win over the rowdy crowd often forged a close bond with his or her audience and thus created a strong feeling of camaraderie between the audience and the company. The crowd was encouraged to participate through active response, and sometimes, through actual performance: audience members were frequently
asked to sing along (Kift 70). A music-hall audience thus exercised great power over the evening’s entertainment.

Holmes meticulously tries to recreate the atmosphere of a music hall in *Drood* by addressing these facets of music-hall culture. The result is a highly experimental adaptation that seems to catapult its audience back in time to 1870s London. Every element of Holmes’s play is used to support the conceptual frame, and Dickens’s novel plays a central role in sustaining this illusion, as the plot to *Edwin Drood* is meticulously incorporated into the music-hall frame. Holmes is thus able to emphasize the British roots of the source.

The play opens with the introduction of the chairman, Mr. William Cartright, who sets about calling the audience to order, much as his Victorian predecessors would have done. His invitation to the crowd, “so come on, let’s all be vulgar and uncivilized as is legally possible” (6), is a humorous exaggeration of the chairman’s sense of camaraderie with the working-class crowd, and Holmes repeatedly emphasizes that the chairman’s jokes, usually cracked at the expense of the audience, are simply his way of connecting with the group. The chairman plays a significant part throughout Holmes’s adaptation, and he executes many of the same functions that his Victorian forebears would have performed. As the emcee, he introduces the actors to the audience: “And who dear ladies and gentlemen, more suited to essay the role of John Jasper than that gifted vocalist himself, your very own MR. CLIVE PAGET!” (7). After Clive is introduced and sings his first song in the character of Jasper, the chairman makes certain to solicit applause from the audience: “Your own Clive Paget, ladies and gentlemen! (As applause dies down, Chairman admonishes the audience) I sincerely hope the moderation of your applause merely means you’re conserving your energy towards the final curtain” (Holmes’s emphases, 9). As in the Victorian era, the chairman
offers support for the performers and encourages the audience to show their appreciation for the effort being put forth onstage, mildly chastising them when they do not sustain their applause. The chairman also makes certain to keep the crowd engaged, frequently employing puns and one-liners to sustain the lighthearted music-hall atmosphere even in the face of the dark subject matter of Dickens’s novel.

Though these actions by the chairman all help to support the historical illusion of the music hall that Holmes attempts to create, the chairman is also used to help advance the narrative. Not only does he present the actors and actresses, but he also introduces the characters and the storyline to the crowd, providing plot exposition when necessary and thus bridging the gap between the two central elements of the show: the music hall and the Dickensian adaptation. “Cloisterham! The ancient mouldering cathedral city of Cloisterham!...Not a particularly encouraging setting for the Christmas season now upon us. A wintry shudder goes through the giant elms as they shed a gust of tears….And here we are in the home of Mr. John Jasper, choirmaster of Cloisterham Cathedral….Choirmaster, composer, organist, and vocal instructor, John Jasper is blessed with a voice the angels themselves might envy” (7). This speech serves as a precursor to his introduction for Clive, and so, the chairman doubles as a narrator, and gives Dickens’s story a narrative voice. The presentation of the Drood story through the commentary of the chairman helps to further sustain the music-hall illusion, and Dickens’s narrative, while not the central element of the adaptation, is thus integrated into the musical’s fundamental concept. The various elements of the concept musical work in tandem to support a central intention that fully underscores the Englishness and historical significance of the textual source.
To advance the music-hall illusion even further, Holmes directly explores the controversial elements of the music hall such as women and sexuality. During the opening number, “There You Are,” each of the leading performers teasingly makes advances toward members of the crowd. These insinuations continue throughout the musical; toward the end of the show, the chairman and male cast members drop hints that Deidre Peregrine, the virginal ingénue playing the innocent Rosa, is hardly as naive as she appears—a clear parallel to the “shy maiden” and “naughty girl” caricatures of the Victorian music hall. In this case, rather than using a stage caricature to undermine an image, a Dickensian character is used to set up the contrast. Though Rosa is clearly a deeper character than the “shy maiden” caricature, she possesses many of the same traits that an actress presenting that caricature would have satirized, particularly, sexual repression. The contrasts between the repressed Rosa and the loose Deidre help to sustain the music-hall illusion, and the presentation of the Drood story, taken from a British novel, thus helps to supplement the overarching concept, taken from the British theatrical tradition. Like Bart, Holmes successfully reconciles an American format with a British source through his own creativity and understanding of English cultural traditions.

Discussing the score to Holmes’s musical in the context of the songs that were made famous in the music halls of the Victorian era is more difficult, for Drood features both a revue-style score and several integrated songs that serve to further the narrative of the mystery story. Some songs are presented mainly in their music-hall context, and other songs are firmly incorporated into the Drood narrative. The most important thing to realize, however, is that each song, no matter what its significance to either the Drood plot or the
music-hall illusion, ultimately helps to reinforce the central idea of recreating music-hall culture onstage.

The integrated songs incorporated into the Drood storyline serve the traditional purposes of either revealing the characters’ personalities or advancing the plot. “A Man Could Go Quite Mad,” the first number sung by Jasper, discloses his dangerous schizophrenia, while “Two Kinsmen” explores the bond between Edwin and his uncle. “Perfect Strangers,” “No Good Can Come From Bad,” and “The Name of Love” are all used to move the story forward: the first focuses on the breakup of Edwin and Rosa’s engagement, the second highlights Neville and Edwin’s dislike for one another, and the last provides a climactic conclusion to the first act as Jasper reveals his lust for Rosa. All of these songs seem removed from the conceptual frame as they are used to advance the Drood narrative rather than merely to divert the audience. Nevertheless, even these numbers help highlight the music-hall concept, for the performers break character following their songs and acknowledge the applause that they receive from the audience. The actors are all aware that they are participating in a musical revue, and they acknowledge their performance in the same way that music-hall performers would have done in the Victorian age. Furthermore, the audience is encouraged to react to the actors’ performances as if they were witnessing a Victorian music-hall production as opposed to a Broadway show.

The less integrated songs like “Never the Luck,” “Both Sides of the Coin,” and “Off to the Races” are presented mainly in their capacity as music-hall entertainment numbers; the reasons for these songs being sung have little or nothing to do with the Drood plot. For “Never the Luck,” the Chairman invites the actor playing Bazzard to sing a song so as to fill up some time in Act I, and the song he selects is more of a personal ballad than anything
relevant to his character. During “Both Sides of the Coin,” the Chairman jokes about his sense of schizophrenia at balancing the roles of Sapsea and chairperson, and thus he sings this energetic patter song as a duet with the already schizophrenic Jasper. Given that both men break character before performing the number, it is clear that the song has little to do with the Drood narrative. However, the patter song, like the sentimental ballad, was yet another beloved form of entertainment in the repertoire of many music halls, and “Both Sides of the Coin” captures the essence of this type of number. Finally, there is “Off to the Races,” which has virtually nothing to do with the Drood story and is simply described as the company’s “trademark theme” (81). The cast sings it because it is a popular music-hall ballad that the audience undoubtedly wishes to hear, not because of its relevance (or lack thereof) to the Drood story. All three numbers embody the traits of typical music-hall songs, “Never the Luck” as a sentimental ballad, “Both Sides of the Coin” as a patter song, and “Off to the Races” as a repertorial number sung to engage the audience. The revue style use of music here is reflective of the way in which music was traditionally presented in the music hall. Thus, these numbers support the overall concept while contributing (however slightly) to the Drood narrative: “Never the Luck” hints at Bazzard’s strange role in the novel, “Both Sides of the Coin” emphasizes the theme of duality, and a scene from the novel is purposefully reset to a racetrack to justify the singing of “Off to the Races.” The historical Englishness of the source is consequently underscored even if the relevance of these songs to that source is not distinctly pronounced.

In between these two categories of songs is a third grouping that seems to bridge the gap between them. Several songs integrated into the Drood narrative retain the tone and style of a traditional music-hall number. “Don’t Quit While You’re Ahead” includes the elements of
a traditional music-hall ballad with the onomatopoeic lyrics: “Ta-Ray-Ta-Rah!/Boom!/Bang it, Bash it, Hoo-ray-Ha-rah!/Boom!/Clang it, Clash it, Oo-Lah-Dee-Dah!/Don’t quit while you’re ahead” (85). The song is likewise used to move the Drood mystery toward its climax. Another number that balances the mystery story with the music-hall frame is Puffer’s first song, “The Wages of Sin.” The song is integrated into the Drood narrative, as it serves to introduce both Puffer and the opium den setting, but it maintains a music-hall quality, as the lyrics contain numerous bawdy jokes befitting of music-hall culture. Even more tellingly, Puffer gets the audience members to sing along during the final chorus; the emphasis on audience participation here highlights the music-hall elements of this particular number.

Obviously, songs are used for a wide variety of purposes in this musical, but each song somehow serves to support the central concept of recreating a music hall. Furthermore, each song reinforces the British elements of this particular adaptation. Though some numbers are more explicitly based on music-hall songs than others, every single song is meant to supplement the show’s central historical concept. In this context, the most important thing to consider when assessing the score to Drood is just how naturalistic each number seems. In every situation, no matter what the circumstances surrounding the song, it seems perfectly logical for the characters to begin singing: they are music-hall performers and song is as natural to them as speech. Whether they are singing music-hall ballads or character driven songs relevant to their adaptation of Edwin Drood, the audience can immediately accept their singing as normal. This facet of the musical supports the underlying concept in multiple ways, not the least of which is the fact that naturalism was an essential element of music-hall performance. Working-class spectators felt as if the musical performances presented in music halls were completely natural given their ability to identify with the characters.
presented onstage: “The identification of principal motifs—booze, romantic adventure, marriage and mothers-in-law, dear old pals, and seaside holidays, and so on—demonstrates a recurrent emphasis on the domestic and the everyday that supports the most broadly agreed reading of music hall song as a naturalistic mode that both documents and confirms a common way of life” (Bailey 129). Peter Bailey asserts that music-hall performers so embodied their characters that the songs they sang became an inseparable part of their stage personalities. The true-to-life elements of their performances furthered the idea that what was being presented onstage was authentic. Clearly, the naturalism that came to define music-hall performance is a tangible element of Holmes’s adaptation given the sense of normality surrounding each number. There is never any question about the legitimacy of a character bursting into song given the frame Holmes employs.

Coupled with this naturalism is a fundamental emphasis on audience participation, yet another critical component of music-hall culture. Just as the success of a music-hall song was dependent on a lively audience, Holmes’s musical is equally dependent on a cooperative and fully engaged crowd, for the success of the overall concept is contingent on the audience members feeling free to participate as if they were watching a music-hall performance. This is especially true at the end of the play when the audience is asked to vote on the conclusion.

No discussion of Dickens’s *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* would be complete without some analysis of the possible conclusions to the story, and this particular facet of the text is essential to Holmes’s adaptation given the fact that he leaves so much of the resolution up to the audience. The scholarly research that Holmes put into his adaptation is undeniable, as he continually has the Chairman reference various theories regarding unresolved issues from the novel. From his emphasis on Edwin’s colonialist mentality, to his subtle hints that Bazzard
would have played a role in the novel’s denouement, Holmes is clearly aware of the diversity of hypotheses regarding Dickens’s unfinished story. Three of the most commonly debated questions regarding the outcome to Dickens’s text include: (a) who killed Edwin Drood?; (b) who is Dick Datchery?; and (c) was Edwin actually murdered? The number of theories that have been put forward regarding these various questions is daunting, and several hypothetical conclusions which have been widely accepted in some circles are continuously discounted in others. Holmes gives the audience a chance to answer the former two of these three questions, but uses the last question regarding the issue of Edwin’s fate to create an interesting little plot twist of his own. He also allows the audience to vote on a “happy ending” to the piece in which two of the remaining characters are humorously paired up as lovers.

“Who killed Edwin Drood?” is arguably the most important question which Holmes leaves in the hands of his audience. Ironically, this is the question which almost all of the leading scholars who have written on the novel are in agreement as to the answer. From the very beginning of the novel, Jasper seems so obvious a suspect that it is difficult to contemplate anyone else having committed the crime. However, if this is truly the case, then where is the “mystery” mentioned in the title; how can there be a whodunit if we clearly know who has done it? Apparently, the more pressing question for Dickens was not “who?”, but rather, “why?”, for although Jasper seems to be the most likely suspect, his motives remain unclear to this day. As in various other Victorian mysteries, such as Braddon’s

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6 The issue of Edwin’s ultimate fate is resolved rather humorously in the musical, for it is the one big question that the audience is not allowed to vote on. Instead, the Chairman extends this privilege to the cast and asks them whether or not Edwin Drood survived. The cast votes in favor of Edwin’s death, which greatly offends Alice Nutting, the young actress playing the part; she throws a tantrum and storms out of the theatre! However, Holmes leaves room for a surprise twist at the end, as the final scene of the play features Edwin miraculously returning from the grave (apparently, Alice’s hissy-fit was planned out). Holmes thus lets the audience have it both ways.
sensation novel *Lady Audley’s Secret*, the titular mystery is actually of secondary importance to various questions regarding the potential madness of the lead character. While the revelation of Jasper as murderer probably would not have surprised many, the disclosure of his reasons for killing his nephew would undoubtedly have fascinated Dickens’s readers (as the various theories put forth regarding this matter continue to fascinate readers today). In *Dickens and Mesmerism*, Fred Kaplan attributes Jasper’s actions to the combined influence of his mesmerist habits and opium abuse:

Jasper could have conditioned himself to go into mesmeric trance while under the influence of opium: the mesmeric tool might have been the drug itself. But whatever the agent, Jasper lives in double consciousness, with two separate states of being: his everyday mind and his mesmeric state, in which he performs actions that his normal consciousness may be unaware of, may indeed purposely suppress because of the immoral and unsocial needs that are being gratified. (154)

Other critics are not so quick to pardon Jasper’s crime due to a Jekyll/Hyde-esque mental instability and point out that most of Dickens’s villains deliberately choose to do evil; both John Thacker and Elsie Karbacz discount theories like Kaplan’s as they refuse to accept that Dickens would have written a villain whose actions were excusable on the basis of mental instability. More outlandish theories include the hypothesis that Jasper was part of a Thugee cult and killed his nephew in a sacrificial ritual. No matter what the case, Jasper’s guilt seems inevitable.

This fact obviously creates several difficulties for Holmes, however, for by staying so true to Dickens’s plot in his adaptation, he too makes it fairly obvious that Jasper killed Edwin. This would seem to impede his determination to have the audience choose the ending to the play: where is the fun in all the spectators selecting Jasper as the killer? The Chairman himself points out that the solution to the mystery seems a bit obvious: “Could this be all there is to the *Mystery of Edwin Drood*? That John Jasper, the obvious villain of the piece,
did indeed kill his nephew in a hopeless attempt to win the love of the fair Miss Rosa Bud?”
(93). In an attempt to preserve the fun of the music-hall concept, Holmes eliminates Jasper as a suspect. Though this decision completely contradicts Dickens’s novel, Holmes is more focused on preserving his conceptual vision by allowing his “music-hall” audience to vote on a surprise ending. To circumvent the problems created by this contradiction, the playwright incorporates a rather blatant yet effective plot device: in the climactic scene where Edwin leaves his uncle’s house on Christmas Eve, Jasper gives Edwin his coat to wear. Thus, nearly all of the characters who are presented as possible suspects are given justifiable motives based on a desire to kill Jasper. Of the six remaining suspects, only two, Bazzard and Neville, are established as having wanted to kill Edwin; everyone else was trying to kill Jasper (see Table 5.1). Though there is very little left of Dickens’s original story in any of these conclusions, the ability of the audience to pick an ending and watch that ending play out is much more conducive to Holmes’s music-hall concept than a simple revelation that Jasper was the killer.

Table 5.1: Possible Murderers in Holmes’s Drood

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bazzard</th>
<th>Crisparkle</th>
<th>Helena</th>
<th>Neville</th>
<th>Puffer</th>
<th>Rosa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bazzard did it to frame Neville and earn fame for himself as the man who solved the case.</td>
<td>Crisparkle did it to try and kill Jasper, as he viewed Jasper’s schizophrenia as a sign that he was possessed.</td>
<td>Helena did it while trying to kill Jasper. She was attempting to protect her brother and Rosa from him.</td>
<td>Neville hated Edwin and thus got rid of him so as to have Rosa for himself.</td>
<td>Puffer did it to try and protect Rosa from Jasper, as it is revealed that she was once Rosa’s nurse.</td>
<td>Rosa, driven to madness by Jasper’s mesmerism, was trying to free herself from his control.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Given the emphasis on English historical and cultural traditions in Drood, Holmes’s use of a Dickensian source in his concept musical can ultimately be linked to his overall conceptual approach in terms of the author’s own approach to the medium of the novel. Dickens, the artist, seems to integrate seamlessly into Holmes’s concept in a way that no other author could. Fundamentally, the celebration of British culture through the historical recreation of
the Victorian music hall complements the incorporation of a Dickensian narrative especially well, as Dickens himself represents the defining elements of nineteenth-century Englishness. This aspect of the author’s legacy, coupled with his appeal to working-class readers, makes him the ideal source for the narrative Holmes incorporates into his musical frame.

Throughout his adaptation, Holmes maintains the music-hall illusion by having his characters act as though they are performing in front of a working-class crowd. This illusion relates back to the composer’s desire to divert and amuse. Holmes’s concept of the necessity of entertainment, especially for the lower class patrons who would have been attending music-hall shows, is immediately evocative of the driving principle behind the Dickens canon, for Dickens firmly believed that working-class people needed to be entertained. His frequent celebration of forms of entertainment that were considered low epitomizes this fact.

Paul Schlicke has written extensively on this subject, and his book entitled *Dickens and Popular Entertainment* provides a wealth of information on Dickens’s widespread incorporation of various entertainment forms into his novels. The author describes Dickens as a champion for all the popular amusements that came under attack during the Victorian age, as the author did what he could to try and defend popular entertainment from the Evangelical forces that sought to pass stricter Sabbatarian laws. The Dickens canon can serve as an invaluable historical guide to the popular entertainment forms of the Victorian period, as theater companies, itinerant players, Punch and Judy shows, circuses, and country fairs are all featured in the various novels.

Popular entertainment was not only essential to the themes, plots, and structures of Dickens’s novels, but simultaneously, to the author’s approach to his craft: “His repeated advice to fellow-novelists was to take seriously the need to entertain readers” (Schlicke
In the first volume of *Household Words*, Dickens further explains this desire to entertain his readers through illuminating the imaginative elements of everyday life:

No mere utilitarian spirit, no iron binding of the mind to grim realities, will give a harsh tone to our Household Words. In the bosoms of the young and old, of the well-to-do and of the poor, we would tenderly cherish that light of Fancy which is inherent in the human breast; which, according to its nurture, burns with an inspiring flame, or sinks into a sullen glare, but which (or woe betide that day!) can never be extinguished. To show to all, that in all familiar things, even in those which are repellant on the surface, there is Romance enough, if we will find it out: - to teach the hardest workers at this whirling wheel of toil, that their lot is not necessarily a moody, brutal fact, excluded from the sympathies and graces of imagination; to bring the greater and the lesser in degree, together, upon that wide field, and mutually dispose them to a better acquaintance and a kinder understanding - is one main object of our Household Words. (1)

Dickens’s reference to the “hardest workers at the whirling wheel of toil” reinforces his sympathy towards the working classes and their need for entertainment as a means of relieving their burdens. Indeed, the desire to entertain is central to Dickens’s understanding of his art; it is likewise central to the philosophy behind the music hall, and of course, to the concept behind Holmes’s vision, thus establishing clear historical links between the three.

Strangely, despite the inclusion of so many different types of popular entertainment forms in his works, Dickens “pays surprisingly little attention to the music hall” (Schlicke *Oxford* 395). Schlicke mentions two short pieces published by Dickens in *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*, the first written by Dickens himself and the second by his colleague Richard Halliday. Both pieces feature a fictitious character visiting some entertainment spots associated with the lower class. In Dickens’s piece, he insists that the working class has a “right to be amused” (“Amusements” 196) and decries the efforts of some reformers to close down these saloons or revoke their licenses. Though he acknowledges some of the dirty,

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7 Another piece by Schlicke, a short article entitled “Glorious Apollers and Ancient Buffaloes,” provides some information about the culture of tavern singing and supper clubs, both of which were precursors to the formalized music hall. The article focuses mostly on the character of Swiveller from *The Old Curiosity Shop.*
lowbrow elements of music-hall culture, he disagrees with those who feel that shutting the saloons down is the best solution:

Ten thousand people, every week, all the year round, are estimated to attend this place of amusement. If it were closed to-morrow—if there were fifty such and they were all closed tomorrow—the only result would be to cause that to be privately and evasively done, which is now publicly done; to render the harm of it much greater, and to exhibit the suppressive power of the law in an oppressive and partial light. The people who now resort here, will be amused somewhere….We had far better apply ourselves to improving the character of their amusement. (Dickens’s emphases, “Amusements” 198)

Halliday echoes these sentiments in his own sketch; like Dickens, he believes that reformers should focus on elevating the entertainment rather than shutting down the institution. The central lesson of *Hard Times* is the necessity of entertainment and imagination, particularly for the working class. As Sleary explains the necessity of the circus folk and their culture to Gradgrind, he elucidates this particular element of Dickens’s worldview: “People muth be amuthed. They can’t be alwayth a learning, nor yet they can’t be alwayth a working, they an’t made for it” (390). While Holmes might have selected a different mystery story to serve his music-hall concept, *Edwin Drood* seems an exceptionally appropriate choice given the fact that Dickens’s desire to entertain corresponds so well to Holmes’s vision of this particular adaptation. This merger of the Dickensian source with the music-hall concept would have been impossible if Holmes had attempted to write a book show; however, by approaching the material from a conceptual standpoint, Holmes was able to attain a balance between the show’s divergent historical elements.

Ironically, this imaginative musical based on Dickens’s very last novel might serve as an excellent model for a new version of Dickens’s very first novel. A concept musical adaptation of *Pickwick Papers* would seem the next logical step in the evolution of the Pickwickian musical. The benefits of such an approach in the context of adapting *Pickwick*
Papers include the de-emphasis of narrative in most concept musicals, and also, the ability to build a musical around a unifying theme. This approach would simultaneously allow for greater emphasis on the British elements of the source, some of which are lost in the more Americanized adaptation Pickwick. The driving concept to any such adaptation of Pickwick Papers would have to relate to the theme of fellowship, as the novel itself is structured around the close bond between Mr. Pickwick and his friends. Given the significant role that drinking plays in many of their (mis)adventures, the various songs in the score might be written to replicate traditional English tavern songs. Just as Holmes sought to recreate music-hall culture in his adaptation, a composer might try to replicate the saloon singing culture that preceded the music hall. Such an approach would highlight the historical and cultural roots of Dickens’s text.

Since 1837, Dickens’s novels have been adapted for the musical stage, though the conventions of the stage musical have changed significantly over the past 170 years. The question of where Dickens will fit in with the current historical trends in musical theater remains to be answered, but as these previous examples reveal, writers have succeeded in adapting Boz’s works so as to integrate them into the dominant conventions of stage music from diverse periods. From Pickwick to Drood, the Dickensian musical has clearly run a fascinating historical course.
SECTION III
Audience

The success of Lionel Bart’s *Oliver!* (1960) and the subsequent film adaptation (1968) exerted a significant influence on the culture text of *Oliver Twist*, perhaps most fundamentally by reinventing the dark world of *Twist* as a happy, musical world that both children and adults could appreciate. One of Michael Pointer’s chief complaints against *Oliver!* is that the cheery musical adaptation is untrue to the dark tenor of Dickens’s original text. Pointer labels this divergence as part of an unhealthy trend in adaptations of Dickens, and his criticism displays the same level of protectiveness that many British scholars feel regarding the source material: “The jollification of Dickens, long the cinema’s way of moderating the difficult parts of the stories, swamped the subject” (85). While Pointer’s bitter censure of *Oliver!* is highly subjective, he raises an important question regarding the cultural view of Dickens outside the medium of his novels. *Oliver!* was not the first Dickensian adaptation to stress the joys of the author’s worlds while downplaying the terrors. Indeed, the “jollification” of Dickens has resulted from many factors. Clearly, there is something escapist about the sentimental Dickensian vision of luckless orphans who triumph over adversity. Moreover, the enduring popularity of *A Christmas Carol* has contributed to the cultural association of Dickens with all that is merry. In this context, it is understandable why ceramic Dickens villages are popular collector’s items. The idyllic little society represented in these miniatures is bereft of the dangers found in many of Boz’s works.
The jollification of Dickens in *Oliver!* created a new trend for future adaptors of *Twist*, as documented in Chapter 4. Some of the latest adaptations of the novel have tamed the subject matter so as to make it more accessible to younger audiences; the trailers for both the recent *Masterpiece Theatre* version and the 2005 Polanski film clearly marketed these adaptations toward a family demographic. Exposing children to the wonders of Dickens’s worlds through film adaptations or stage musicals can have the positive effect of inspiring these young people to eventually take up the novels so as to experience Dickens firsthand. However, since many of these adaptations, including *Oliver!*, downplay the gloom and darkness of Dickens, young readers might be forced to accept several unwelcome realities.

This tendency is the inspiration for the title of Chapter 6, “Disneyfying Dickens.” To clarify, the Walt Disney Company has, in fact, produced only a handful of features adapted from Dickens’s novels, two of which were based on the ubiquitous *A Christmas Carol*. Dickens’s sophisticated prose style and richly layered stories would be difficult to adapt into a seventy-five minute animated feature without heavily modifying the source material, perhaps to a point where it would no longer even be recognizably Dickensian. This lack of Disney adaptations of Dickens’s novels becomes even clearer when one considers the cultural contexts involved, as the distinctly British characteristics of Dickens’s narratives and characters would most likely have translated poorly to the Americanized idiom in which Disney worked.¹

Nevertheless, the term “Disneyfying” can indicate a great many things, for the name Disney calls to mind several traits: colorful characters, family audiences, music, mass

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¹ Notably, many prominent British scholars and film critics loathed Disney’s *Alice in Wonderland* as they felt that the filmmaker had Americanized a British classic and thus robbed it of its true spirit. There were similar reactions when the very first Disney short adapted from Milne’s *Winnie-the-Pooh*, entitled “Winnie-the-Pooh and the Honey Tree,” omitted Piglet and replaced him with the overtly Americanized character, Gopher. Once again, the British traits of the source were supplanted.
marketing, fantasy, and, perhaps most significantly, sentimentalized happy endings. Pointer’s criticisms of Oliver! read like the traditional outcries against “Disneyfication” by scholars and cultural critics. Disney remains an easy target for such criticisms due to its unparalleled success in repackaging traditional stories for child audiences, primarily because by doing so, Disney rarely encourages young people to take up the source material. Rather, the Disney adaptation becomes the dominant version of the story.

Though the Walt Disney Company has made little use of Dickens’s novels, it is still helpful to contemplate the idea of what exactly it means to “Disneyfy” Dickens, particularly in regards to the topic of audience. Disney succeeded in transforming sources that were aimed at a mature audience into lighter, child-friendly adaptations—a technique which Pointer and other academics would undoubtedly equate with “dumbing down.” Oliver! itself was marketed as a family film: “Sensibly, Columbia opened the film for the Christmas season and promoted it as a family movie” (Moss 249). Oliver! also became the first and only G-rated film to win the Best Picture Oscar.

While Pointer may view Oliver! as a “Disneyfied” version of Dickens, it is important to note that, in direct contrast to Walt Disney’s tendency to Americanize his sources, Bart, the Englishman, succeeds in preserving the essentially British elements of the source even while working in an American format: the book musical. Furthermore, instead of creating his own widely divergent set of characters to operate within the confines of the Dickensian narrative, Bart succeeds in maintaining the memorable qualities of the author’s creations, modifying them only so that they fit the tenets of the musical form. Though Bart tames Fagin and reduces the brutality of the world through which little Oliver must navigate, he never

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compromises Dickens’s vision to the point where the adaptation’s source is unrecognizable. Whereas Disney made *Disney* films, Bart clearly created a *Dickens* adaptation.

Other attempts to “Disneyfy” Dickens, that is, to tame the source and create a musical adaptation for family audiences, have met with mixed results in terms of the preservation of the Dickensian vision. One particularly useful adaptation to assess in this regard is Anthony Newley’s film *Mr. Quilp* (1975). This musical adaptation of *The Old Curiosity Shop* is based heavily on Bart’s version of *Oliver Twist*. Just as Bart rewrote Fagin as roguish and loveable, thus creating a more family-friendly adaptation, so did Newley recreate Quilp as an impish clown who is constantly cracking jokes or bursting into jaunty songs. In the film, the terrifying elements of the character are excised so as to create a lively musical with a boisterous hero/villain. Unfortunately, since the lead villain is presented as a charming and humorous jester, there is no sense of significance to the struggle between Little Nell and Quilp, and the very basis of the Dickensian narrative is lost entirely. Though Quilp is still depicted as Nell’s persecutor, he spends almost the entire film either engaging in slapstick capers or singing jolly melodies; thus, the audience never takes his threats seriously.

While the film is certainly child-friendly and its lack of conflict allows for the customarily cheery and utopian vision created in most musicals, Newley is unable to reconcile this vision with the gloomy Dickensian source material. Tellingly, the utopia is unexpectedly shattered by the dark and depressing ending to the piece which remains surprisingly faithful to the original text. Though the adaptation certainly “Disneyfies” Dickens, Newley does not see the project through to its natural climax. Rather, in trying to remain faithful to the novel’s conclusion while simultaneously revising the story for family audiences, he creates a conflicted adaptation that does not prove particularly alluring to potential readers of Dickens.
Just as the unparalleled popularity of Lionel Bart’s Oliver! (1960) inspired a wave of Dickensian stage musicals, the success of Sir Carol Reed’s film adaptation of Oliver! (1968) instigated a string of film musicals based on Dickens’s novels. While Reed’s film was based on a stage show, several of these subsequent versions were original motion picture adaptations inspired solely by the novels themselves. The most successful of these films was Leslie Bricusse’s Scrooge (1970), which scored well with both critics and audiences, was nominated for several Oscars, and remains a popular adaptation of A Christmas Carol to this day (see Chapter 8). Several of the other film musical adaptations of Dickens’s novels produced in the years following the release of Oliver! were far less successful, though this discrepancy is understandable as the musical genre was rapidly declining in popularity.

Between 1958 and 1969 (the year that Oliver! won numerous Oscars including Best Picture), four other movie musicals won Academy Awards for Best Picture: Gigi, West Side Story, My Fair Lady, and The Sound of Music. Oliver! thus capped off a decade during which the musical genre remained both commercially viable and critically successful. Oliver! also marked the end of an era, however, as is indicated by the fact that decidedly un-musical Midnight Cowboy was named “Best Picture” at the 42nd Academy Awards ceremony the following year.¹ Several film critics cite Fiddler on the Roof as the last truly great film musical of this era, and even Fiddler was unable to duplicate the success of the 60s, as The

¹ In 1969, Oliver! was the first G-rated film to win Best Picture; ironically, Midnight Cowboy was the first X-rated film to win Best Picture.
French Connection dominated the 1972 Oscars. By the early 70s, the shift in audience and critical tastes from happy, stylish musicals to gritty, urban dramas was in full effect. When Chicago picked up the Best Picture Oscar at the 2003 Academy Awards ceremony, it was the first musical since Oliver! to receive this honor.

In Charles Dickens on the Screen, Michael Pointer indirectly hints to the decline of the movie musical when discussing several of the adaptations of Dickens’s novels that followed Oliver! and Scrooge, none of which were able to match the success of their predecessors. Some of these versions did not even reach full fruition; a film musical adaptation of Great Expectations starring Michael York as Pip was shot and released in 1974, but the musical element was dropped before production was completed: “Early reports heralded it as a musical to be called Pip! in obvious emulation of the one-word titles Oliver! and Scrooge, but it ended up as an unexciting nonmusical TV film that was given a theatrical showing in Britain” (88). Pointer notes that although the songs were recorded, the musical sequences were never shot when it was realized that the score did nothing to enhance the story.

Another forgotten Dickensian musical created in this era was Mr. Quilp (1975), a film adaptation of The Old Curiosity Shop produced by Reader’s Digest, Inc. Mr. Quilp was the third in a string of musical family films created by the publishing company in the early 1970s; it was preceded by musical adaptations of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, both of which were scored by Disney Company veterans Richard and Robert Sherman. However, Mr. Quilp marked the first Reader’s Digest musical that was adapted from a British source, and as such, the score was written by an English composer. British crooner, actor, songwriter, composer, director, and all around celebrity personality Anthony Newley wrote
the music and songs for the adaptation; he also starred as the title character, and the entire film is injected with Newley’s rebellious vivacity.

Newley had previously worked with friend and longtime collaborator Leslie Bricusse on two influential British stage musicals that found success both at home and abroad: *Stop the World—I Want to Get Off* and *The Smell of the Greasepaint—The Roar of the Crowd*. The two men had also collaborated on the films *Dr. Dolittle* and *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*; Bricusse wrote the screenplay and songs for the former (which featured Newley in the role of Matthew Mugg), while the latter contains songs written by the two men. Though Bricusse did not team up with Newley for *Mr. Quilp*, he was no stranger to Dickensian musical adaptations, having written the lyrics for *Pickwick* and the songs and screenplay for *Scrooge*. In 1992, Newley would play the title role of Scrooge in Bricusse’s stage version of the film. Curiously, the duo never collaborated on writing a Dickensian musical despite the fact that Dickens played a significant role in both of their careers.²

Whereas Bricusse’s Dickensian adaptations enjoyed success in their day, *Mr. Quilp* flopped at the box office upon its initial release and has since fallen into obscurity. Furthermore, when the film was released on VHS by Embassy Home Entertainment (under its alternate title, *The Old Curiosity Shop*), it was inexplicably cut and condensed; though the official runtime of the film is listed as 118 minutes, the VHS runs only 94 minutes. Thus, even those familiar with the adaptation may not have seen the full version. Clearly, the film’s lack of success did not bode well for its treatment on home video.

If *Mr. Quilp* is to be regarded as a failure, it is an interesting failure to say the least. This chapter will examine the forgotten *Mr. Quilp* in regards to the marketing of the film toward family audiences and the “Disneyfication” of Dickens’s original story and characters.²

² Newley made his film debut as the Artful Dodger in David Lean’s 1948 adaptation of *Oliver Twist*. 
Emphasis will also be placed on the film’s relationship to *Oliver!*, with a specific focus on the transformation of the villainous characters from the original novels. Fagin and Quilp are two of the most overtly detestable characters in the Dickens canon, and yet, both *Oliver!* and *Mr. Quilp* present the characters in a completely different light. As mentioned in Chapters 3 and 4, Bart and Reed’s efforts at reinventing Fagin were so successful that subsequent adaptations of *Oliver Twist* have followed their example and presented Fagin in a far more sympathetic light than many of the previous film or stage versions of the novel. Conversely, the similar effort made by Newley, screenwriters Louis and Irene Kamp, and director Michael Tuchner to transform Quilp from despicable villain to charming co-protagonist so as to create a family-friendly adaptation engenders many problems in the adaptation and ultimately weakens the plot, the characterization of Nell, and the overall thematic slant of the story. A concluding analysis will focus on the reduced role of Dick Swiveller, perhaps the most glaring fault in the very conception of the film. Had the adaptation been based around the character of Swiveller, who, in the novel, offers a happy medium between the ethereal death-force that is Nell and the violent life-force that is Quilp, the film might have been able to preserve the dichotomies that define the novel while still operating in the genre of the family musical.

*The Old Curiosity Shop* is best remembered for the famous death of the heroine, and the text is often cited as the chief emblem of Dickens’s sentimentality; as mentioned in the Overture, Huxley regarded *Curiosity Shop* as a primary example of “vulgarity” in literature. The emotional elements that Huxley finds vulgar could theoretically translate well to the musical genre given the genre’s emphasis on catharsis. Clearly, *The Old Curiosity Shop* embodies several of the definitive characteristics which make Dickens such a popular source
for musical adaptation. As in *Oliver Twist*, there are enough emotional high points to justify the incorporation of songs, and the peculiar idioms of several characters seem infinitely adaptable to forms of musical expression. Furthermore, the allegorical tenor of the novel seems somehow conducive to musical adaptation, for just as most good musicals balance realistic elements with the romanticism inherent in song, dance, and music, Dickens’s original novel balances a realistic look at the losses brought about by industrialization in nineteenth-century England with an allegorical story about an innocent heroine and her vile tormentor.

While these elements of the story seem favorable in regards to the potential of creating a musical treatment, other facets of this particular novel complicate the adaptation process. The meandering plot is a particularly difficult stumbling block for anyone seeking to adapt this story into a play or film (musical or otherwise). Dickens’s episodic plots have previously been discussed as conducive to musical treatment given the inherently episodic quality of songs and production numbers in musical films and plays, but *The Old Curiosity Shop* is so completely disjointed that creating a consistent narrative is innately difficult. Whereas it is possible to string together select episodes from *The Pickwick Papers* and *Nicholas Nickleby* to form a more coherent storyline, this technique is laced with innumerable difficulties regarding Dickens’s fourth novel. In her article entitled “Dickens’s Streetwalkers,” Laurie Langbauer describes the “aimless, peripatetic motion” (417) of the plot to *The Old Curiosity Shop*, and there is never any real sense of consistent movement, either in Nell’s journeys through the countryside, or in the narrative itself. *The Pickwick*

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3 To return to the idea that melodrama in Dickens often seems conducive to the emotional extremes necessitated by the conventions of musical theater, *The Old Curiosity Shop* complicates this matter in that the actual novel contains very little in the way of traditional melodrama. Lewis Horne notes that Quilp and Nell lie too far outside the spectrum of everyday life to be truly melodramatic (494).
Papers builds toward Mr. Pickwick’s trial and entry into the Fleet, and Nicholas Nickleby builds toward Nicholas’s ultimate confrontation with his uncle and Ralph’s subsequent downfall. One might assert that The Old Curiosity Shop builds towards Nell’s death, but the movement never truly seems linear. Near the end of the text, Nell disappears for a seemingly interminable number of chapters so that the author can wrap up the Kit Nubbles subplot. By the time Dickens finally returns to Nell’s storyline in the novel’s final chapters, she has already died, and her death has occurred “off-screen.”

Though thematic links between these two halves remain, such links are difficult to translate into a visual medium such as film. Thus, an adaptor is faced with the difficulty of weaving together a storyline from episodes that are so thoroughly disconnected that creating a consistent, unifying plot seems almost impossible. To their credit, the Kamps successfully overcome many of these difficulties in Mr. Quilp, and the organization of the film’s plot is one of the adaptation’s best attributes. As in the case of Oliver!, the writers take a single storyline from the more convoluted novel and use it as the main narrative thread. Whereas Bart makes Oliver’s struggle to find love the central arc of his musical and thus eliminates such elements as the Monks/Maylie subplot, the Kamps place the conflict between Little Nell and Daniel Quilp at the heart of this adaptation and excise the unnecessary subplots involving Fred Trent, the schoolmaster, Mrs. Nubbles, and the Garland family. The screenwriters also modify the reasons for the discord between Quilp and Nell’s grandfather so as to give the plot a greater sense of causality. In the book, Quilp learns that the old man has gambled away all of his money early in the novel, and he plots against him as part of an elaborate

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4 Kenneth M. Sroka writes that the novel can, in some ways, be viewed as an extended treatment of Nell’s death: “Dickens’s contemporaries were more willing than twentieth-century readers to accept Nell’s slow dying as realistic and emotionally effective. If, however, Nell’s dying is viewed allegorically, enlightened modern readers need not apologize for Dickens’s lack of realism or for Victorian sentimentality” (193).
scheme to revenge himself on Fred Trent and Dick Swiveller; by tricking the two young wastrels into thinking the old man has money, he can ruin them both by assisting them in Swiveller’s courtship of Nell, who is, in reality, penniless. This convoluted storyline is easily forgettable, particularly given how quickly Fred Trent disappears from the text. In the Newley film, Quilp does not learn of Nell’s grandfather’s gambling habits until near the very end of the movie, and his reasons for pursuing the pair throughout are thus much more straightforward and logical: he wants to know what has happened to his money. Like Lionel Bart, the Kamps streamline Dickens’s original text, reducing the plot to its essentials.

Despite the successful condensing of the plot, the creative team’s attempt to duplicate the success of the film version of *Oliver!* by creating a lively, family-friendly musical version of one of Dickens’s early novels creates several problems. While the fairytale qualities of *The Old Curiosity Shop* make a family-oriented adaptation appropriate, the writers tame the source material to a point where the rich thematic elements of Dickens’s original text are lost. Here, the idea of “Disneyfing” Dickens becomes more apparent. The simplified, G-rated approach of the marketing campaign surrounding *Mr. Quilp*, along with various elements within the film itself, all seem analogous to the processes employed by the Disney studios when adopting and adapting literary sources.

The advertising manual that was sent out to theaters set to showcase *Mr. Quilp* in 1975 reveals the family-oriented marketing campaign that Embassy Pictures and Reader’s Digest put together to promote the movie upon its release. A subsection of the advertising manual labeled “Exploitation” describes several different promotional campaigns that the studios encouraged local theaters to engage in while advertising the film. The use of that dubious
“Mr. Quilp” involves the touching relationship between a grandfather and his granddaughter. Using this as a peg, offer free admission to any grandparent accompanied by a grandchild—or vice-versa. A picture of the youngest and oldest pairs would make news.

There aren’t too many females around today named Nell, so you’re sure not to be deluged with customers if you give free admission to anyone named Nell. It also is a newsworthy offer.

Since “Mr. Quilp” is being sold as a “family picture” you might want to consider a discount for a family attending with 3 or more children. Again such an announcement would have news value. (4)

Clearly, the film was intended for family audiences, and the minds behind this marketing campaign came up with interesting ways to “exploit” that fact for the purpose of drawing large family crowds. Other campaigns suggested by the manual range from costume contests to antique shows, all meant to emphasize the family-friendly qualities of the film.

The very title Mr. Quilp clearly underscores these qualities while simultaneously highlighting Anthony Newley’s centrality to the project. The film was partially marketed around Newley’s popularity, which was arguably at its peak at that point in time. Several posters included in the advertising manual make reference to Newley “stop[ping] the world once more” (1), an obvious allusion to his success as the writer and star of Stop the World and Roar of the Greasepaint. Furthermore, several posters and ads printed in the advertising manual include the following tagline: “What the Dickens is a ‘Quilp’?” (8). The posters offer several answers to the question, all of which play up the family-oriented qualities of the musical: “It’s simply the most sensational songfilled, funfilled, high stepping joy of a movie musical” (8) or “it’s something to shout about, sing about, laugh about, and fall in love with too!” (8). Accompanying these taglines are cartoonish sketches of Newley as Quilp in
charming poses alongside Tom Scott and Little Nell. Clearly, the promotional techniques behind *Mr. Quilp* embodied the “Disneyfied” approach taken by the film’s creators.

Lest anyone should forget the source material, the marketing guide also details several ways in which the original text might be exploited while promoting the movie adaptation:

“Mr. Quilp” is based on the Charles Dickens classic “The Old Curiosity Shop.” Dickens is required reading in most schools and you should find ready acceptance for the picture among educators.

1) Arrange a special screening for principals, boards of education members, and English teachers.

2) Offer special discount tickets to the theater for students attending individually and a larger discount for those attending in groups.

3) Use group sales techniques to arrange early morning showings for entire schools.

4) Prepare flyers for school bulletin boards.

5) Contact parent-teacher organizations and arrange to speak before them about the picture.

6) Consider inviting the PTA to meet at your theater one morning. Show them the trailer.

7) Offer a prize for the best review of the picture by a student.

8) Suggest special displays in school libraries of Dickens’s books. (5)

To top things off, the New American Library published a special *Mr. Quilp* edition of *The Old Curiosity Shop* in conjunction with the film’s release.

As in the case of most Disney adaptations, the promotional campaign to *Mr. Quilp* focused on reaching out to family audiences. Nevertheless, none of these promotional techniques contain any references to the actual reading of the novel. It is one thing to offer a prize for a student who writes a review of the film, but it is another thing entirely to encourage students to take up the original text and write some sort of response to it. Evidently, this was not a priority for those executives charged with promoting the film, though given the “Disneyfied”
approach taken by the creative team, the discrepancy is understandable. *Mr. Quilp* presents such a lighthearted and whimsical interpretation of what is arguably the darkest novel of Dickens’s early period that the idea of a child transitioning from watching the film to reading the novel seems difficult to process. The film was clearly envisioned as an adaptation for an audience of children and their parents as opposed to an adaptation for an audience of future readers of Dickens.

While the promotional campaign behind *Mr. Quilp* indicates that the team behind the creation of this musical understood from the beginning that the movie was intended for a very specific demographic, the downside of creating an adaptation so thoroughly focused on a family audience is that the darker and more adult facets of Dickens’s text must be sacrificed. The creative team behind *Mr. Quilp* eliminates many of the threatening elements of Dickens’s novel and creates a much lighter and simpler adaptation. The chief disparity between the film and its source lies in the treatment of Quilp, who is reduced from a diabolical and sadistic representation of evil to a clownish and mischievous rascal.

Quilp is arguably the most overtly despicable character in the entire Dickens canon. When he encounters the Nubbles family and jokes that, “I don’t eat babies; I don’t like ‘em” (160), his status as an ogre is overtly emphasized. Throughout the novel, the narrator draws attention to the dwarf’s inhuman traits. The memorable scene in which he breakfasts with his wife and mother-in-law highlights his almost superhuman ability to derive physical pleasure from seemingly painful activities: “He ate hard eggs, shell and all, devoured gigantic prawns with the heads and tails on, chewed tobacco and water-cresses at the same time and with extraordinary greediness, drank boiling tea without winking, bit his fork and spoon till they bent again, and in short performed so many horrify
were nearly frightened out of their wits, and began to doubt if he were really a human creature” (40). Many other characters in the novel are left with the same doubts, as Quilp terrifies the likes of Sampson Brass, Mrs. Nubbles, and of course, Little Nell.

Interestingly, Nell and Quilp have few direct encounters throughout the novel, and after Nell and her grandfather leave London, she never interacts with him again. Nevertheless, Nell’s continuous suffering is constantly linked back to Quilp’s sweeping malevolence. As Paul Schlicke writes:

Quilp is the grotesque embodiment of the active malignity which surrounds Nell. In his open lust the threat is sexual; in his financial power over her grandfather it is economic and domestic; in her antagonism to her friend it is social; in his contempt for her moral integrity it is metaphysical. Quilp seems to be everywhere: he appears in her dreams at night he pursues her into the countryside; his jaunty mockery is reembodied in the Punch showmen and in Mrs. Jarley’s wax effigies. (“Embracing”16)

John W. Noffsinger echoes this assertion, claiming that “Nell is almost continually persecuted by a Quilpian energy which pervades the world and is either refracted in environment or internalized in individual consciousness” (29). Even Nell’s grandfather succumbs to this energy, for when he allows his gambling addiction to consume him, he is described as being just as monstrous as Quilp himself: “She had no fear of the dear old grandfather, in whose love for her this disease of the brain had been engendered; but the man she had seen that night, wrapt in the game of chance, lurking in her room, and counting the money by the glimmering light, seemed like another creature in his shape, a monstrous distortion of his image, a something to recoil from” (230). The old man, who arguably plays an even greater role in her demise than Quilp, is imbued with a Quilpian violence and malevolence when he succumbs to his temptation to gamble. The fact that Quilp can hold such power over Nell’s grandfather, the world of the novel, and the narrative itself, even when he is not in direct contact with the protagonist, illustrates his pervasive evil. Virtually
every scene that features the villain reinforces the idea that there is something inhuman about
him: he is more evil spirit than human being.

Simultaneously, Quilp is a highly entertaining character. His interactions with the Brasses,
Tom Scott, and, most especially, Mrs. Jiniwin, are extremely funny; one cannot help but
laugh when he plots against his mother-in-law, murmuring: “If I could poison that dear old
lady’s rum and water… I’d die happy” (366). Nevertheless, while we laugh at Quilp’s
wicked sense of humor, it is nervous laughter at best. Michael Steig asserts that there is
something liberating about Quilp’s hilarity, as the reader can find amusement in his
outrageous behavior while simultaneously taking comfort in the fact that the character has no
basis in reality: “Identifying with Quilp may depend on an ability to see one’s own forbidden
rage and illicit sexual desires embodied in a character who can escape condemnation in one’s
mind because he is both funny and not quite human” (111). Such psychoanalytic readings of
Quilp have been a popular critical approach to The Old Curiosity Shop since the mid-
twentieth century, and many critics have consistently found him a more interesting character
than Nell in this regard.

Despite the dwarf’s entertaining qualities, Dickens never once indicates that he in any way
approves of Quilp’s behavior. Whereas certain elements of Fagin’s world are cautiously
celebrated in Oliver Twist, nothing about Quilp’s conduct is praised in The Old Curiosity
Shop. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the charisma and magnetism of Bart’s Fagin are not so far
removed from Dickens’s original version of the character as many critics have asserted.
Fagin must be charismatic and magnetic—how else could he lure children to him and corrupt
them for his sinister purposes? Quilp, on the other hand, lacks any sort of magnetism—he is
utterly repellant and purely detestable even as he makes the reader laugh. The villain’s
decidedly ghastly death seems a fitting punishment for his wicked ways, and Dickens imbues the scene with such gruesome detail that it is almost cathartic to watch the wretched dwarf finally get his comeuppance. Tellingly, Quilp is buried “with a stake through his heart in the centre of four lonely roads,” (549), a further indication of his fairytale roots, and also, of the extreme lengths to which Dickens went in order to assure the reader (and himself) that the demon has been vanquished.

Given the dichotomy between his malevolence and his hilarity, adapting the character of Quilp for other media poses several difficulties. Converting him from text to flesh and blood seems inherently problematic given his fairytale qualities. Furthermore, achieving a balance between his sharply divergent traits in a play or film not only requires a talented writer, but likewise, a gifted actor—one who can make Quilp both entertaining and terrifying. This point becomes moot in Mr. Quilp, for while Anthony Newley is unquestionably entertaining in the title role, the terrifying aspects of the character have been completely removed. All of Quilp’s cruelty and sadism are stripped away, and Newley’s version of the character is more the charming rogue than monstrous villain.

This modification is directly evocative of Bart’s changes to Fagin in Oliver!, but although Bart modifies Fagin into a sympathetic protagonist, he is certain to preserve a conflict in the musical through the character of Bill Sikes. So long as Sikes is a threat to Oliver, we cannot be certain that the orphan will find the happiness that he desires. The fact that Sikes presents such a danger to the utterly sympathetic Oliver helps to justify the audience’s appreciation of Fagin—though corrupt and roguish, he is nowhere near as evil as the housebreaker.

Since Newley’s Quilp is harmless, and since there is no alternative antagonist against whom Nell can play the role of heroine, Newley’s musical lacks a villain. Without a true
conflict to drive the plot, there is no real drama, and there is never any sense of urgency to
the film, nor to Nell’s fatal flight from London with her grandfather. Though these
modifications make the film appropriate for family audiences, even a family musical needs
some sort of tension to move the story forward. *Mr. Quilp* lacks such tension entirely, and
any chance for drawing the viewer to the original text is passed up.

From the moment Quilp is introduced in the movie, it is clear that he is going to be
portrayed as a clown as opposed to a villain, and the character quickly establishes a
sympathetic connection with the audience as Newley repeatedly breaks the fourth wall by
singing directly to the camera. His first number, “Quilp,” is sung as a duet with Tom Scott,
and the song is almost vaudevillian in its emphasis on slapstick and one-liners:

**QUILP** *(to Scott)*
I’m Quilp, Quilp!
You can call me master!

**SCOTT**
Blimey what a bastar…(*Quilp quickly covers his mouth*)

**QUILP** *(to the audience)*
What a delightful youth!
A bit uncouth, although,
A boy is just a pagan,
Says my old friend Fagin,
And he ought to know.

The number is choreographed humorously as well, and throughout the song, Quilp
inadvertently (and sometimes deliberately) beats up on Scott. The physical humor employed
in Newley’s performance, as well as the little jokes that Quilp frequently shares with the
audience, reveal that there is no reason for children watching the film to fear this weird little
man. Indeed, few characters in the film, unlike their literary counterparts, are presented as
being afraid of the dwarf. In the original text, such fears are warranted, for there is a constant
danger of physical violence breaking out whenever Quilp is around. The “Disneyfied” world of the film is one in which no one seems truly capable of injuring anyone else, and the dramatic stakes are lowered significantly as a result.

Given that Newley is playing the title character in a family film marketed to children, it is little surprise that his “Mr. Quilp” is more hilarious than he is horrible. Just as the film itself was marketed to families, so was the character of Quilp promoted as an endearing scallywag. The poster art for the adaptation displays Quilp in a humorously haughty pose linking arms with Little Nell and Tom Scott, both of whom show no loathing of the dwarf. He is depicted as an avuncular imp, and this pictorial representation is very close to the presentation of the character on film. Another newspaper ad included in the advertising manual uses the following tagline in response to the “What the Dickens is a Quilp?” teaser: “He’s a charmer, a rascal, a comic, a fool, and you can’t help but love him too!” (8). Marketing the film around Newley’s “loveable” version of Quilp was clearly in keeping with the lighthearted tone of the piece, but it likewise served to distance the adaptation from its source to a point where the story becomes virtually unrecognizable; as such, there is little incentive for young people in the audience to consider exploring the novel.

In the original text, it is the contrasts between Nell and Quilp that form the central arc of the story. Despite the highly disjointed plot of the novel, the thematic structure of the piece is fairly solid: the beautiful and purely good Nell is set in complete opposition to the hideous and purely evil Quilp. These are the primary elements of the binary characteristics that define the novel; as in most fairytales, the contrasts between good and evil are straightforward. Paul Schlicke writes that “as Dickens follows through the logic of his conception, neither Nell, young, beautiful, and good, nor Quilp, the extreme embodiment of
all grotesque things, can compromise with the values of the other, and neither can exist
without the other” (“Embracing” 9). Nell is more than a simple representation of goodness,
however. She also represents a world that is rapidly dying out in the face of industrialization
and urbanization. Though Nell is set in contrast to the dusty old antiques that crowd the
shelves of her grandfather’s shop, she actually has much in common with these objects and
the shop itself: both are representative of the past. Just as Nell dies at the end of the novel, so
is the curiosity shop torn down, and the narrator sadly indicates that this is the natural
consequence of the passage of time:

[Kit] sometimes took them to the street where she had lived; but new improvements had
altered it so much, it was not like the same. The old house had been long ago pulled down,
and a fine broad road was in its place. At first he would draw with his stick a square upon
the ground to show them where it used to stand. But he soon became uncertain of the spot,
and could only say it was thereabouts, he thought, and these alterations were confusing.

Such are the changes which a few years bring about, and so do things pass away, like a tale
that is told! (555)

Traditional readings of Nell’s death have emphasized the elements of the character inspired
by Mary Hogarth, focusing on her inherent goodness and the inability of someone so pure to
survive in a fallen world. The idea can be taken further, however, when one considers how
Nell’s inability to adapt to a rapidly changing world hastens her demise.

Ella Westland astutely compares Nell and the Marchioness along these lines: “Nell, gentle
and innocent, cannot cope with London’s competitiveness and corruption; the Marchioness,
resilient and streetwise, can survive and succeed. Nell is the spiritual child of the declining
countryside; but the Marchioness is the child of the growing city” (71). Moreover, the quiet
nostalgia represented by Nell is a distinct contrast to the violent, enterprising energy
represented by Quilp. Throughout the novel, Nell is associated with this “declining
countryside.” Schlicke notes Dickens’s repeated emphasis on rural forms of entertainment,
as the various difficulties faced by the itinerant performers whom Nell encounters mirror the child’s own problems in trying to survive in an increasingly hostile world: “The demise of the foremost gathering place in England for itinerant performers and the greatest annual festivity for the common people in London adds poignant dimensions to the nostalgic zone of the novel and gives the utmost timeliness to its themes” (*Popular Entertainment* 95). The journey into the nightmarish world of Black Town, an industrialized city plagued by pollution, pestilence, and union riots, is ultimately what causes Nell’s demise, as she never truly recovers from the traumatic experience. There was little hope for Nell’s survival from the beginning, however. As Schlicke writes, “from the outset, however, [Nell and her grandfather’s] progress holds a double paradox, in the vagueness of their hope and the utter impossibility of its realization” (“Embracing” 21). It is impossible for Nell to find refuge from the passage of time, nor to turn back the forces of industrialization.

This does not mean that Quilp “wins” in the conflict with Nell; notably, both characters die in the end, another example of the fairytale dynamic that exists between them. Richard Walsh describes the complications of the conflict between the two characters: “Nell’s death is right because she is too good for this world, she is ideal….To accept it is to admit the power of Quilp and the fallen state of human nature…but in doing so also to affirm and cleave to the ideal” (317). The death of Quilp helps to validate Nell’s demise for even though good does not necessarily triumph over evil, evil does not prevail either.

As noted, Quilp’s direct confrontations with Nell are kept to a minimum by Dickens, but the nightmare world in which Nell finds herself is one that is polluted by Quilp’s presence. Black Town in particular seems to embody the violence, toxicity, madness, and chaos that is represented by the dwarf: “Quilp’s energy infuses both the nightmarish landscape and the
individual mind” (Noffsinger 29). Though the final installments of the novel focus on the
conflict between Quilp and Kit Nubbles, the driving force behind the entire story is the
metaphysical contrast between Quilp and Nell. As such, the modifications that Newley and
the Kamps make to Quilp’s character in their adaptation have obvious repercussions
regarding the thematic significance of the story.

The “Disneyfying” approach used by the creative team behind *Mr. Quilp* means that
everything is simplified, including the themes of the original piece. Transforming Quilp into
a lovable rascal means that the magnitude of the conflict between the dwarf and Nell must
be significantly altered. There can be no contrast between good and evil if malevolence has
been reduced to playfulness and violence has been reduced to slapstick. The negative
elements of creating such a family-style adaptation of Dickens’s novel become more
apparent here, for although a frightening and wicked version of Quilp would have given the
film a more adult tone, the overall consequence of the storyline would have been increased
significantly. One of the most powerful elements of Little Nell’s story is her sheer goodness
in the face of the wickedness represented by Quilp. In a tale that is structured around
binaries, one side can remain compelling only if the other side is presented in an equally
powerful way. To reduce Quilp to comicality is to reduce Nell to banality.

Perhaps the most obvious flaw in the depiction of the conflict between the two characters
is that Quilp is presented as far more entertaining from a musical point of view. While
Newley’s songs are always humorous and almost improvisational in their liveliness, the more
somber ballads linked to Nell’s character are tedious in comparison. Every single musical
number sung by Quilp is classifiable as a Broadway “charm song,” and Newley is so over-
the-top that it is impossible not to find him engaging. Unfortunately, the more Newley tries
to top himself in engaging his audience, the further the adaptation strays from its source; not only does Quilp become increasingly loveable as a result of his entertaining characteristics as presented in the musical’s numbers, but he likewise detracts from Nell by making her far less dynamic.

*Mr. Quilp* features seven songs: “Happiness Pie,” “Quilp,” “When a Felon Needs a Friend,” “Somewhere,” “The Sport of Kings,” “It Shouldn’t Happen to a Dog,” and “Love has the Longest Memory.” The breakdown of this musical score epitomizes several of the problems created by making Quilp the central character in this adaptation. Newley sings in four of the seven numbers in the film: “Quilp,” “When a Felon Needs a Friend,” “The Sport of Kings,” and “It Shouldn’t Happen to a Dog.” Though Nell is given a brief solo in “The Sport of Kings,” her two main numbers are “Somewhere” and “Happiness Pie.” The final song in the film, “Love Has the Longest Memory,” is sung by Kit Nubbles. Obviously, the score is tilted in Newley’s favor. Furthermore, Newley not only sings most of the songs in the film, but he also sings the funniest and most engaging numbers in the adaptation. All of Quilp’s songs fall into one of two categories: comedy songs and charm songs. The comedy songs are presented as a series of jokes, most of which emphasize Quilp’s underhandedness and conniving nature. The blocking of these numbers incorporates a great deal of slapstick humor, and Newly is consistently comical, whether he is adopting mincing mannerisms in “The Sport of Kings,” or abusing Tom Scott in “Quilp.” The term “charm song” was coined by Lehman Engel to designate “a song that embodies generally delicate, optimistic, and rhythmic music, and lyrics of light though not necessarily comedic subject matter” (*American 87*); Engel describes this type of song, in which the singer “charms” the audience, as an offshoot of the more traditional comedy number. It is a testament to Newley’s
charisma that even in his repulsive makeup and bodysuit he comes across as charming, and that same charm is quickly transferred to the character. Here again is one of the central weaknesses of the adaptation: to present Quilp as a charming rascal not only detracts from the villain, but simultaneously reduces the consequence of the entire story. Without the presence of the malignant and vicious Quilp from Dickens’s original text, Nell’s story lacks any true significance, both structurally and thematically. The charming Quilp presented by Newley is not terrifying enough to drive Nell and her grandfather from London, nor wicked enough to represent the evils of a fallen world through which Nell must navigate.

Nevertheless, in the context of the adaptation, Quilp’s songs are appropriate. A family film with a charming rogue as the lead character would not contain scary songs highlighting the villain’s malice, but rather, comical and charming numbers that underscore his charisma.

There is little left for Nell to do from a musical perspective given how much Newley dominates the score. Her first song, “Happiness Pie,” is sung as a duet with Dick Swiveller and, in keeping with the family-oriented approach taken by the creative team, it gets the musical off to a lively and cheerful start. Nell’s cheeriness is meant to come across as infectious as she charms the cynical Swiveller, and there is something of the Disney princess about her when she sings. Notably, the song depicts Nell as being optimistic to the point of naïveté:

When you’re in a pickle and your world is upside down,
A big old frown hangs round the sun all day.
You try to wear a grin, to lift your chin.
But everything around you looks so gray.
But Mr. Swiveller, you can count on people if they can count on you,
Glue your faith on people and it sticks.
And when I’m in a dither, I give me time to say,
Don’t get in a flivver, or a hobble or a bobble or a fix.

Take a little dab of hope, add a lucky bag of beans,
Sprinkle some love into a shovel full of dreams.
Mix them all together in a song and you’ll see why,
Life can be a recipe for happiness pie.

Lucky beans and dreams that fly,
These are the ingredients for happiness pie.

This Nell is just a bit too cheerful, however, and, in keeping with the “Disneyfication” theme, the number significantly simplifies her character and the world in which she exists. The original novel opens with Nell in a more precarious emotional state as the terrors and frustrations relating to her grandfather’s strange behavior are starting to consume her entirely: “The child, in her confidence with Mrs. Quilp, had but feebly described the sadness and sorrow of her thoughts, or the heaviness of the cloud which overhung her home, and cast dark shadows on its hearth. Besides that it was very difficult to impart to any person not intimately acquainted with the life she led, an adequate sense of its gloom and loneliness, a constant fear of in some way committing or injuring the old man” (68). Furthermore, the world in which Nell exists is not a world of “lucky beans” and “happiness pie.” It is an openly hostile and dark world prone to violent change; whereas the worst Nell faces in the film’s opening number is someone jostling her as she dances down the street, Dickens’s original incarnation of the character is vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, starvation, and a myriad of other dangers. The world of the novel ultimately proves to be a world in which she cannot survive.

“Happiness Pie” is thus emblematic of the overly simplified presentation of Nell’s character created by the lack of dramatic urgency in the film. Nell is getting along just fine in this world, and the idea of her having to cope with the problems brought on by industrialization or urbanization is dropped entirely. This ties in perfectly with Newley’s
harmless portrayal of Quilp. In a world where Quilp is a “charmer,” navigating such an environment is as easy as baking “happiness pie.”

Nell’s only other solo number, “Somewhere,” a song in which she conveys her love for her grandfather, is noteworthy for its lack of specificity. It could be sung by anyone who has any sort of attachment to another person, and it is far less entertaining than anything Newley sings. Here it is useful to again contrast Bart’s Oliver! with Newley’s Mr. Quilp. Though Oliver is less entertaining from a musical standpoint than Fagin, who sings all of the most engaging songs in the play, Bart keeps Oliver sympathetic and alluring by having him participate in several chorus numbers like “Consider Yourself,” “I’d Do Anything,” and “Be Back Soon.” Furthermore, the more somber songs sung by Oliver are directly connected to his character—while Nell sings a ballad that could be sung by anyone, “Where is Love?” contains thoughts and feelings that are specific to one particular child: Oliver Twist. As such, it is easier for the audience to identify with and understand Oliver. Nell’s songs are confined to mere generalities such as optimism and love. There are no thoughts or feelings presented in these songs that specifically seem to embody her character. She is thus robbed of any true power or sympathy, and she never seems as defined and distinctive a character as Newley’s Quilp. Thus, the negative consequences of portraying Quilp in this way impact the score as well. The rascally Quilp presented by Newley detracts from Nell’s significance both dramatically and musically, and the binaries that Dickens creates in his novel are discarded for the sake of allowing an entertaining musical personality to let loose his charisma and engage a family audience. While the overly simplified, family-friendly vision of The Old Curiosity Shop presented in Mr. Quilp stems from the revision of the titular character into a roguish clown, the character who is hurt the most by these changes is Nell herself, for
without the hostile forces represented by Quilp, forces against which she must act in order to try and save herself and her grandfather, there is nothing significant about her story.

Consequently, *Mr. Quilp* presents the viewer with little incentive to investigate the original source; by the end of the film, there is even less incentive to do so. In addressing the awkward conclusion to the film, one must again recall *Oliver!*, as the alternative endings to the stage and film versions of Bart’s musical reinforce the difficulties of creating an appropriate ending to a family-style musical adaptation of Dickens in which the villain has been changed from an antagonist to a loveable rogue—Bart’s Fagin clearly does not deserve to be hanged. Nevertheless, Bart was unwilling to give the old man an entirely happy ending either. Creating a suitable ending for *Mr. Quilp* is even more difficult, for Nell’s death, the element of the novel’s conclusion that everyone remembers, seems utterly unsuitable for a family-friendly musical version of the novel. Furthermore, Quilp’s horrific death by drowning, presented as the fitting punishment for his innumerable crimes in the novel, seems far too excessive in the context of this adaptation—Newley’s Quilp is inestimably less evil than his literary counterpart. Despite these incongruities, the screenwriters include both of these elements in their film adaptation: Quilp drowns while trying to escape the police, and Nell dies just as the single gentleman and Kit arrive at the church. Neither one of these outcomes seems fitting; as Fred Guida writes, “the ending of Mr. Quilp is downbeat and very unmusical” (109). It is certainly not appropriate in the context of this particular adaptation, which, up until the last fifteen minutes, preserves a family-friendly and overly simplified vision of Dickens’s story.

In the novel, Nell dies after she has finally found peace in the countryside; however, rather than allow the heroine to live out her days in happiness outside of the urban setting which has
caused her so much strife, Dickens has her die a tranquil death surrounded by those who care about her. Some critics contend that Nell’s death is inevitable from the beginning, as the innocence which she represents is rapidly passing away around her, while others view the heroine’s demise as related to her inability to adapt to either her sexual development, or to a world that is becoming increasingly harsh and mechanized; still others label her death as a mere sentimental convention employed by the author. While readers continue to disagree over the significance of her death, it is clear that before Nell dies there has been at least some form of redemption: Nell’s grandfather is briefly restored to sanity and compassion when he and his granddaughter begin their final days in the church town. While the death of her grandfather immediately follows Nell’s demise, there is no denying that Nell was able to live out her last days in peace. Unfortunately, the film provides no such inkling of redemption surrounding Nell’s relationship with her grandfather, nor does it assign any thematic significance to Nell’s death.

In the film adaptation, Nell begins to take ill after leaving Mrs. Jarley’s employ, and when she is finally found by the single gentleman and Kit in the final scenes of the film, it is too late to save her. There is no sense of causality nor any dramatic significance behind her death; Quilp has not tormented Nell to the point where she is susceptible to death, and the nightmarish journey into Black Town has not taken place. Furthermore, the simplistic depiction of Nell throughout the film means that it is futile to try and connect her demise with the urbanization of Britain, or the passing away of life’s simple pleasures; Nell is straightforwardly presented as a twelve-year-old girl traveling with her grandfather, and the fact that we cannot view her life (and death) thematically or allegorically due to the oversimplified vision of the filmmakers makes her end all the more shocking. To view Nell
symbolically, as in the novel, is to partly shield oneself from the fact that she has died far too young; to actually see Nell, the twelve-year-old innocent, dying for no precise reason is appalling, particularly in the context of a family film. The final number to the musical, “Love has the Longest Memory,” is a mournful ballad sung by Kit to eulogize Nell. In the concluding shots, it is revealed that several years have passed and Kit is now the proprietor of the curiosity shop; he has even preserved Little Nell’s old room, setting it up like a shrine to the deceased girl. This is in direct contrast to the conclusion of the novel which links Nell’s death and the subsequent destruction of the old shop together; Nell could not survive in a changing world and the curiosity shop, filled with antiquities, is likewise destroyed by the violent hand of progress. In Mr. Quilp, there is never any focus on the thematic significance of Nell’s pilgrimage and its movement toward her eventual demise. Thus, the casual depiction of her death comes across as a desperate attempt to remain faithful to the original novel. This morbid inclusion is completely at odds with the family-friendly framework of the film; a young viewer is thus given even less incentive to turn to the source.

Quilp’s death is equally unnecessary and shocking, though the inclusion of Nell’s death seems to necessitate Quilp’s demise; as entertaining and likeable as Newley is, to leave Quilp alive after killing off Little Nell would seem almost sacrilegious. The curious thing about the deaths of the two characters is how concerned the creative team seems with preserving some sort of fidelity to the novel in the final scenes of the film. Meanwhile, the depiction of these characters, particularly Quilp himself, up to this point has been thoroughly unfaithful to the original novel thanks to the “Disneyfied” approach take by the writers and director. This shift marks a complete alteration in the tone of the piece, and the family musical that we have watched up to this point becomes another film entirely. If Lionel Bart had ended Oliver! by
sending Fagin to the gallows, it is doubtful that the piece would have attained its lasting popularity, for the morbid fate of Bart’s rascally yet loveable version of the character would have been inconsistent with his characterization of the old man up to that point. By killing off Nell and Quilp, the creative team behind *Mr. Quilp* breaks with their own approach to the source material and creates a dark and depressing conclusion to what was supposed to be a lighthearted family musical. One could of course argue that the fidelity of the writers to the original novel here is actually a positive quality of the adaptation in that it prepares young readers for the tragic conclusion to the text—conversely, a young reader who cut his or her Dickensian teeth on *Oliver!* would be shocked and appalled by some of the darker elements of *Twist*. Nevertheless, the very term “adaptation” implies change, and given all the changes that had already been made to the source material so as to facilitate the family musical approach taken by the creative team behind *Mr. Quilp*, a modified conclusion that better fit the tenets of this cheery, “Disneyfied” variation would have provided the film with a sense of coherence which ultimately would have created a clearer incentive for exploring the source.

Before concluding this chapter, it is useful to analyze the depiction of another character who suffers as a result of the changes made to Quilp: Dick Swiveller. The impact of Newley’s Quilp on Swiveller is less obvious than his impact on Nell. Nevertheless, if Swiveller had been made a more integral character to this adaptation, it is possible that the creative team would have been able to avoid some of the problems which weaken the film.

Swiveller has always been a popular Dickensian character, and G.K. Chesterton once went so far as to label him the noblest of all Dickens’s creations. Dickens clearly saw a great deal of potential in the character, for in the novel, Dick quickly evolves from a dissolute youth into one of the central heroes. Schlicke traces Swiveller’s evolution in his article,
“Embracing the New Spirit of the Age,” and cites Dick’s compassion for the Marchioness as a major turning point for the character: “Before he discovers Sally Brass’s abused maid-of-all-work, Swiveller has encountered nothing to move him beyond affectation and carelessness. But when she strongly rouses his curiosity, she also wakens a previously latent moral sense” (26). Thus, Swiveller is one of the first characters in the Dickens canon to evolve. In *The Pickwick Papers*, *Oliver Twist*, and *Nicholas Nickleby*, the heroes remain good, the villains remain wicked, and there is virtually no crossover or progression. It is largely the same in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, yet although the novel is characterized by a stark polarization between good and evil, Swiveller is able to embody several different shades of gray. Furthermore, though he spends most of the novel interacting with evil characters such as Quilp, the Brasses, or Fred Trent, he never engages in any truly wicked deeds himself. Rather, Swiveller is able to charm both the heroes and villains of *The Old Curiosity Shop* and winds up providing a healthy alternative to the two extremes represented by Nell and Quilp. Whereas Nell and Quilp both perish, Swiveller lives and creates a truly happy ending for both himself and his beloved Marchioness. Lewis Horne cites the adaptability of these two characters as their means of surviving; it is the fact that they (unlike Nell and Quilp) can change that allows them to endure (505). Anthony O’Keefe also acknowledges this trait: “By the novel’s end, Dick has become the usefully realistic mean between Quilp’s mad vitalism and Nell’s enervated deathliness” (48). Swiveller is not only an entertaining presence in the novel—he also plays an important part in the thematic arc of the story. While Nell and Quilp operate in a polarized fairytale world, Swiveller is able to function happily and productively in a more realistic world, and his imagination and compassion, two qualities which link him directly to his creator, go on to help a great many characters (including
himself)—it is his kindness toward the Marchioness which leads to her saving his life and their working together to rescue Kit Nubbles. Whereas Nell seems doomed to passively watch the world around her die away, and Quilp is motivated to actively cause mayhem and destruction, Swiveller takes a combined approach by applying Nell’s compassion with actions and energy.

Another one of Swiveller’s defining traits is his connection with music, as his speech is laden with allusions to songs and rhymes. This makes him such an engaging personality that he even manages to charm some of the novel’s most unlikable characters. The monstrous Sally Brass comes to enjoy having him around, as his lively personality brightens the atmosphere of the law office: “It was on this lady, then, that Mr. Swiveller burst in full freshness as something new and hitherto undreamed of, lighting up the office with scraps of song and merriment” (270). His vernacular has a similar effect on the Marchioness and Mrs. Nubbles, both of whom are in desperate need of some cheer. Dick’s allusions to songs are extensive, and James T. Lightwood documents these references in *Charles Dickens and Music*. Coupled with his quotes of familiar lyrics is Swiveller’s entertaining manner of expressing himself. His creative way of describing various situations gives him an almost musical quality and much of his dialogue seems as though it might be sung instead of spoken.

From the moment he is introduced, Swiveller’s grandiose manner of speaking and tendency to use metaphors and similes presents him in a musical light: “‘But what,’ said Mr. Swiveller with a sigh, ‘what is the odds so long as the fire of soul is kindled at the taper of conviviality, and the wing of friendship never moults a feather! What is the odds so long as the spirit is expanded by means of rosy wine, and the present moment is the least happiest of
our existence!’” (17). As Lightwood points out, however, it is not surprising that Dick has such an extensive knowledge of songs and music, as this quality should be “expected from one who held the distinguished office of ‘Perpetual Grand Master of the Glorious Apollers,’” (125). Not only is Swiveller quite knowledgeable regarding popular songs and melodies—he is also an early proponent of Victorian music-hall culture.

The Glorious Apollers, described by Dick as “a select convivial circle,” (103) is a group of friends who meet together for eating, drinking, and singing. Given Swiveller’s fondness for song and fellowship, it is no surprise that he is a leading member of the group; when Fred Trent gets annoyed with Dick, he angrily tells him that he “needn’t act the chairman here” (17). The idea of Dick as the chairman of the group adds new dimensions to his musical personality, for the chairman was an important figure in the culture of the nineteenth-century music hall (see Chapter 5). As a form of entertainment, the music hall evolved from tavern singing and supper clubs. The format gradually became more centralized, with recognized stage acts and performances, but the conviviality inherent in that form, a conviviality embodied by the character of Swiveller, remained the same. Paul Schlicke notes that “song and supper clubs were ubiquitous in London during Dickens’s lifetime, and it is futile to look for a single one which might have served as a model for Swiveller’s society” (“Glorious Apollers” 173). Nevertheless, Schlicke admirably traces several possible inspirations for the Glorious Apollers before determining that “Swiveller’s office as Perpetual Grand of the Glorious Apollers…exists within a precise historical context, which can clarify several aspects of his place within The Old Curiosity Shop” (“Glorious Apollers” 177). Swiveller’s songs and speeches are not merely elements of his own eccentric personality, but rather, components of his “social role” (“Glorious Apollers” 177) as chairman and club member.
Given that Swiveller’s defining traits were connected with the musical culture of his time period, it is curious that the creative team behind *Mr. Quilp* did not take advantage of the opportunities provided by the presence of such a character in the creation of a musical adaptation, particularly when music-hall culture proved essential to Bart’s vision of *Oliver!* Placing Swiveller at the center of the adaptation and utilizing the conventions of the music hall through this character might have aided the writers and director in their attempt to duplicate the success of *Oliver!*

Though Swiveller is included in the film, the number of scenes featuring the character is surprisingly small. Furthermore, this incarnation of Swiveller emphasizes only certain elements of the original character; actor David Hemmings plays up Dick’s sarcasm and laziness while downplaying his imagination, musicality, and conviviality. One might be tempted to blame Hemmings for this anemic version of Dickens’s colorful character, but Hemmings does his best with the material; furthermore, if blame is to be placed for the rather drab depiction of Swiveller, it should fall squarely on Michael Tuchner, the director, and, to a lesser extent, on Newley. Hemmings’s understated portrayal of Swiveller is used to counterbalance Newley’s over-the-top portrayal of Quilp; since the characters share many scenes, it would be difficult for Hemmings to play up Swiveller’s more outlandish characteristics given that Newley was already excessively embellishing Quilp’s eccentricities. By allowing Newley to go overboard with his portrayal of Quilp, Tuchner necessitates the reining in of Swiveller. Had the director instructed Newley to tone down his comic portrayal of Quilp, then a more lively and humorous version of Swiveller, one far closer to his literary predecessor, would have been able to emerge. In addition, since
Newley’s Quilp dominates the score, there is little opportunity for Swiveller to showcase his musical personality.

Dick participates in three numbers in the film; two of these songs are duets and the other is an ensemble number, which means he has no solo songs to himself. Furthermore, his role in almost all of these songs downplays any inherently musical traits in the character; in both “Happiness Pie” and “When a Felon Needs a Friend,” he starts out as an auditor and is gradually drawn into the number by the other singers. The idea of Dick Swiveller needing an invitation to join in singing seems ludicrous when one recalls the leading role that his literary predecessor took in organizing the Glorious Apollers. “When a Felon Needs a Friend” provides a particularly good example here, as Swiveller plays the straight man to the clownish Quilp and Brass. Throughout the entire number, Quilp and the Brasses engage in humorous refrains and melodies while an annoyed Swiveller tries to get his work done. It is doubtful that Dickens’s Swiveller would ever choose work over music and play, but the changes made to the character in *Mr. Quilp* stem from the larger changes made to Quilp himself. Since Quilp is the roguish musical clown, Swiveller must take on the role of straight man.

Several interesting questions can be raised here about the opportunities that the creative team missed regarding Swiveller’s character; the idea of turning Quilp into a charming rascal seems all the more ineffective when one considers that Swiveller himself was already cast in that part by Dickens. Several of the numbers that Quilp sings seem like the kinds of songs that Swiveller would sing given his convivial personality and fondness for music; “The Sport of Kings” and “When a Felon Needs a Friend” are both sung by Quilp, but the sentiments conveyed in these numbers are reminiscent of Swiveller: “The Sport of Kings” emphasizes
the excitement of the racetrack, while “When a Felon Needs a Friend” humorously chronicles why the law is such an excellent choice of professions. The comical lyrics and engaging melodies in both songs seem infinitely more suited for Swiveller than Quilp. In short, Swiveller seems a much better choice for the lead character in a musical version of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, particularly given his ability to interact with both the heroic and villainous characters from the novel. If the creative team had put Swiveller at the forefront of the adaptation and allowed Quilp to retain his malice and villainy, the film would have been helped immeasurably: not only would Nell’s story have retained its thematic significance, but there would have been a greater sense of drama and conflict in the adaptation in spite of its family-friendly tone. The simplified approach that the filmmakers used when adapting the source material into a musical, specifically, the reduction of Quilp to an impish joker, detracts completely from Nell’s storyline and likewise reduces Swiveller to the thankless role of straight man opposite Newley’s clown. Whereas most scholars have pointed out Swiveller’s importance to the original novel by citing his happy ending in contrast to the ends met by Quilp and Nell, the film eliminates these matters by dropping both Swiveller and the Marchioness from the last half hour of the movie. Though this omission is disappointing, it makes sense in the context of the adaptation. Swiveller cannot offer an alternative to the pure goodness of Nell nor the pure malevolence of Quilp when both of these qualities have been eliminated from the characters completely.

Both *Oliver Twist* and *The Old Curiosity Shop* are representative works from Dickens’s early period, though these two novels are somewhat darker than either of their respective predecessors: the violent urban terrain of Fagin’s den is far removed from the merry countryside of Mr. Pickwick, while Nell’s ultimate fate stands in sharp contrast to the fate of
Nicholas Nickleby and his friends. *Oliver Twist* and *The Old Curiosity Shop* are also similar in their dichotomized presentation of good and evil; both novels feature purely innocent child protagonists who maintain their goodness in the face of an evil villain and a corrupting world. Furthermore, both novels display the picaresque qualities of Dickens’s early fiction, which, as mentioned, prove conducive to musical adaptation because of the episodic nature of the story. Nevertheless, the modifications to the central villain that work so well in *Oliver!* cause irreparable damage in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Newley’s charming and humorous take on Quilp weakens the significance of characters like Nell and Dick Swiveller while simultaneously oversimplifying the themes and motifs of Dickens’s original text. The approach taken by the producers of the film when marketing the movie to family audiences provides an excellent example of what it means to “Disneyfy” Dickens, though the dark ending to the film negates the “Disneyfied” approach entirely and contributes to the confused and awkward tenor of the adaptation. Though *Mr. Quilp* has been ignored by Dickensians and forgotten by audiences, it remains an intriguing if flawed version of one of Dickens’s less frequently adapted novels, particularly from the standpoint of the target demographic—the film was clearly intended for children. Unfortunately, Newley ultimately provides little reason for young people to try reading the novel.
SECTION IV
Narrative

As discussed in the Overture, the theatricality of Dickens’s novels seems to indicate a desire on the part of the author to connect with his audience in a more direct way. One of Dickens’s most effective tools in this regard was the omniscient, third-person narrative voice that he employed in many of his novels. Many of Dickens’s narrators possess distinct personalities, including the harried editor who is assembling The Pickwick Papers, the sardonic social critic who narrates Oliver Twist, or the wistful storyteller who recounts A Tale of Two Cities. Like many of his most memorable characters, these narrators seem to be manifestations of Dickens himself, and given that they are responsible for telling the stories that he has written, the correlation between creator and fictional creation is even stronger.

In keeping with the subject of theatricality, the use of vivacious narrators allowed Dickens to take on yet another exciting role while serializing his novels. Anny Sadrin writes that “Dickens wants his narrator to be present, almost visible and tangible, to come down on earth and, occasionally, like the ancient gods, assume a human shape….He also wants him to be recognized as a character in his own right, even when anonymous and disembodied—which he is in most novels—and to be everywhere recognizable as the authentic and unique performer of the Dickens text” (emphasis added, Expectations 181). While the entertaining qualities of many of Dickens’s narrators are undeniable, the overt presence of the narrative voice in many of Dickens’s novels complicates the process of adapting these works for the stage or screen.
In a film or television serial, a voice-over could be used to inject narrative commentary at key moments in the story, but given the narrator’s anonymity in many of Dickens’s novels, a bodiless, unidentifiable voice could be disruptive. Simultaneously, it would be unfeasible to include voice-over commentary throughout the entire film; thus, duplicating the constant presence of the narrator’s voice would prove impossible. Another technique utilized by several early filmmakers, including David Lean, was to superimpose text taken from the actual novel over various transitional shots in the film. Once again, the possibilities of this approach were limited—even a silent film adaptation of Dickens could not incorporate enough of the narrator’s textual commentary to fully duplicate the narrative voice as presented in the novel. Some of the humor and vitality of Dickens is thus automatically lost in the adaptation process due to the inability of filmmakers to seamlessly incorporate the narrator and his commentary into this form of entertainment.

This issue of narrative voice in musical adaptations of Dickens is complicated by the very fact that music is the central means of telling the story: songs and orchestral underscoring both serve to move the narrative forward, and likewise, to provide insight into what the characters are thinking and feeling. When a character sings solo, that character temporarily takes full control of the narrative as he or she uses music to reveal the depths of his or her feelings. Thus, musicals often feature multiple “narrators” even when one specific character is designated as the central storyteller. The various soloists share the role of raconteur, while the orchestra, through its use of underscoring and incidental music, provides an overriding narrative “voice,” even though that voice does not employ spoken words.

Part of the success enjoyed by Oliver! (1960) is attributable to Lionel Bart’s determination to explore a wide variety of musical voices in this adaptation. No two characters sing exactly
the same types of songs, and the different types of solo music employed by the various
characters, including Nancy and Oliver’s pop idiom, Fagin’s Yiddish melodies, and the
Dodger’s Cockney/music-hall style, help to create a diverse musical narrative. This is
attained at the sacrifice of some of Dickens’s social commentary as spoken by the narrator of
the original text. Given the even division of the musical score between the various
characters, only the orchestra itself comes close to attaining the same level of omniscience as
the original Dickensian narrator, and the orchestra’s “commentary” employs musical notes,
not words. Though the orchestra can help set the tone for the scenes being presented onstage,
it cannot fully duplicate the sardonic narrative voice of Dickens’s storyteller.

The situation becomes even more complicated when one considers Dickens’s first-person
narratives. In this context, the presence of the narrative voice is fundamental to the meaning
of the work, for the narrator is no longer anonymous. Rather, the voice that the protagonist
utilizes while reflecting on his or her own life story helps to underscore the bildungsroman
motif that is so essential to these works. The reader watches the character transition from a
vulnerable, fallible protagonist who often has little control over his or her own life into a
conscientious and insightful narrator who has complete control over the representation of his
or her life story. Incorporating a first-person narrator into a musical adaptation is
challenging, for although this character could conceivably sing several songs in his or her
capacity as storyteller, he or she could not sing the entire musical score.

Two of Dickens’s most popular works, David Copperfield and Great Expectations, feature
first-person narrators: David and Pip recount their own life stories. Numerous non-musical
adaptations of these two novels have grappled with the issue of how to depict the hero’s
transition into the role of narrator despite the fact that doing so seems dependent on using a
textual medium as opposed to a visual or auditory one. A reader can trace the subtle nuances employed by Dickens as he chronicles the protagonists’ journeys from helplessness to empowerment. Furthermore, the novel allows for a juxtapositioning of the different incarnations and voices of the characters, as David and Pip can look back at their younger selves from an adult perspective while simultaneously stepping back into the personas of their childhood selves and writing from the viewpoint of the vulnerable adolescent.

This idea of merging voices is noteworthy in the context of musical theater because the conventions of the musical allow for a literal merging of voices through song. Thus, the possibility exists for combining the voices of two different incarnations of a Dickensian first-person narrator: two actors playing David or Pip, one the narrator, the other the protagonist, could theoretically sing together. However, despite the fact that both *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations* have been adapted into musicals, no version of these two works has fully explored the potential for such a merger. The 1981 musical *Copperfield* eliminates David’s narration, while a 1975 musical adaptation of *Great Expectations* does not feature any duets between the different incarnations of Pip. Unfortunately, David and Pip are defined in part by their roles as narrators, and to limit these roles restricts the significance of their stories.

This chapter will explore the trend of musical composers to simply rely on the orchestra as a narrative device as opposed to lyrically combining Dickens’s narrative prose with orchestral music. In the case of *Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*, the lack of experimentation regarding the musical possibilities of the narrators’ words results in a less intimate understanding of the two lead characters. Though the David and Pip presented in these adaptations are capable of using music to express their feelings, the evolution of the characters’ narrative voices is limited because of the composers’ traditionalist approaches.
Chapter 7
Sing Me a Story – Setting Pip and David’s Voices to Music

David Copperfield and Great Expectations are consistently ranked as two of Dickens’s finest novels. Along with Bleak House, these two works are usually set in competition for the designation of Dickens’s magnum opus. Interestingly, all three of these novels utilize a first-person narrator, though the narrative to Bleak House is famously divided between Esther Summerson and the anonymous third-person narrator. It is somewhat surprising that these first-person Dickensian novels should be ranked so highly given that Dickens made far more extensive use of one of the definitive conventions of the Victorian novel throughout his career: the omniscient, third-person voice. This type of narration dominates many of his works; as intimated in the Sadrin quote presented in the introduction to this section, the third-person omniscient voice allowed Dickens to transition from the distancing role of author to the more intimate role of storyteller, largely through the personable nature and garrulousness of his narrators. The extroverted, comical, melodramatic, and socially conscientious personalities of many of Dickens’ narrators have helped to characterize Dickens’s overall writing style while simultaneously characterizing Dickens himself to an extent—though linking the voices of Dickens’s narrators directly to the author in terms of his own voice and personality is impractical, it is certainly fair to say that taking on the role of narrator was an especially personalized act for Dickens given that it allowed him to address his readership. Indeed, one could argue that it was only through his dramatic readings that the author was able to establish an even more direct connection with his public. Here, Dickens was literally
allowed to step into the role of storyteller as he read aloud from his novels, though the transition could not have been particularly difficult given the links that were already present between the author and his narrators. While the narrator in *Oliver Twist* is not Dickens per se, he embodies many of the traits that continue to define the reading public’s understanding of Dickens in terms of his ostentation, humor, theatricality, social vision, and sentimentality.

In the case of Dickens’s first-person narrators, the situation is more delicate, as the author must write from the perspectives of his lead characters as opposed to simply stepping into the role of narrator. Though Dickens’s first-person novels are widely acclaimed, several critics have noted that there are moments in the story where the author seems to usurp the position of these first-person storytellers—that is, rather than letting Pip, David, and Esther tell their stories in their own ways, he transforms them into Dickensian narrators whose personalities diverge from the personalities of the characters themselves to a certain extent. Sadrin notes that there are scenes in *Bleak House* where Esther seems to recede into the background even as she is telling the story, for the narrator’s descriptiveness and sense of humor seem a bit too Dickensian for the shy heroine: “Clearly, someone has trespassed on her territory and no Dickens reader can fail to identify the naughty intruder” (*Expectations* 185). Robert Garis likewise asserts that Dickens usurps the narrative from Pip in *Great Expectations*, using Pip solely as a “theatrical mask which he manipulates with the utmost dexterity when it is needed….Who has ever ‘believed’ that the famous comic set-pieces—Trabb’s boy or Mr. Wopsle’s *Hamlet*—were the work of a man named Philip Pirrip called Pip?” (191). The same argument could obviously be raised regarding David’s narration, though the biographical bond between author and character, along with the fact that David is a professional novelist himself and thus accustomed to writing from the perspective of a third-
person narrator, adds another complicated degree to such assertions. In spite of Dickens’s occasional tendency to step on the toes of these first-person narrators, Pip’s narrative is heavily shaped by his overarching feelings of guilt and frustration, Esther’s narrative epitomizes her shy compassion, and David’s narrative reflects his consuming struggle to discover the proper balance between firmness and love. Furthermore, it is understandable that the characters should display some inklings of Dickens’s own narrative technique given that Pip, Esther, and David are all manifestations of Dickens.

Out of these three first-person narrators, and perhaps, out of all of Dickens’s creations, Pip and David are often cited as being the characters with the most direct connection to Dickens himself, though the optimism of David’s narration contradicts the more pessimistic narrative created by Pip. The ten-year gap between the two novels casts some light on the disparity here, as *David Copperfield*, serialized between 1849 and 1850, was written in the period before Dickens faced the numerous hardships of the 1850s, including the collapse of his marriage in 1858 and the scandal which followed. Paul Schlicke notes that *David Copperfield* was clearly an important precursor to *Expectations*, but likewise that “*Copperfield* touches more closely on actual events of Dickens’s life, [while] *Great Expectations*...is the more intimate spiritual autobiography” (*Oxford* 262). Like Dickens, Pip faces a great many setbacks along his journey, but he endures and manages to attain satisfaction, if not unmitigated joy.

The fact that *Great Expectations* and *David Copperfield* have proven popular sources for adaptation is somewhat surprising given that the first-person narratives of the novels instantly complicate the adaptation process. For certain, nearly all of Dickens’s novels present challenges to adaptors because of the overt personalities of his storytellers; even the third-
person novels like *Twist* pose narrative problems, as the personality of the storyteller helps to shape the social satire of the novel. Nevertheless, adapting the third-person novels for film and stage is clearly less challenging than adapting the first-person novels simply because the voice of the narrator is less essential to the meaning of the work. While omitting the narrator’s commentary from adaptations of *Twist* may reduce some of the satirical humor of the story, a creative director or writer can find alternatives to compensate for this omission. Such substitutions are far more difficult to achieve in adaptations of *Great Expectations* and *David Copperfield* because of the centrality of the narrators’ voices to the foundation of the texts. Both of these bildungsromans deal with the moral growth of the two heroes as they struggle against adversity before finally attaining happiness, or, in Pip’s case, contentment. As such, Dickens’s use of a first-person narrator in both texts allows the reader true insight into the development of these characters.

The contrasts between Pip and David: vulnerable orphan heroes, and Pip and David: autobiographers, provide an interesting lens through which to examine these two novels, particularly in the context of Gerard Genette’s arguments on the relationship between the first-person narrator and the representation of his or her younger self. Typically in a bildungsroman narrated in the first-person voice, “we…expect to see the narrative bring its hero to the point where the narrator awaits him, in order that these two hypostases might meet and finally merge” (226). Though Genette claims that some critics oversimplify the relationship between hero and narrator, he agrees that there is usually some point in the text where the hero has, through experience and understanding, developed into a person capable of taking on the role of the storyteller. This development leads to an interesting usurpation on the part of the protagonist as he or she eventually overtakes the narrator: “The narrator’s
last sentence is when—is that—the hero finally reaches his first’’ (227). Genette adamantly insists that the two separate versions of the single fictional character do not work together to tell the story, as it is inconceivable for them to both reach the “end” simultaneously. The autobiographical nature of the novel means that the narrative is presented retrospectively; the narrator’s “narrative time” can commence only after the hero’s “story time” has concluded. In the final chapters of *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*, both David and Pip drop hints regarding the passage of time, though the reader is not exactly certain just how many years have passed since the commencement of the story, nor how long the authors have been working on their memoirs. Nevertheless, it is apparent that their “narratives” have commenced only after their “stories” have concluded: David, by marrying Agnes and having a large and happy family of his own, has seemingly attained the balance he has been searching for, while Pip, having reunited with Estella, has attained the satisfaction of knowing that she now understands what his heart “used to be” (359), whether they part forever as in the original ending or become a couple as in the revised version. Both Pip and David have attained the insight necessary to transition from unknowing hero to retrospective narrator. In both cases, the characters have achieved a level of authority over their own minds and hearts that allows them to transition to the empowering role of storyteller: David is no longer reeling from the loss of Dora, nor is he perplexed by the two extremes represented by Mr. Micawber and Mr. Murdstone. Pip is no longer a puppet for Miss Havisham, nor is he deluded by the false promises of his now lost expectations.

The journey from hero to narrator is thus one of empowerment, particularly since both characters are introduced as being virtually helpless. The young David, who is mistreated by the Murdstones and confined to destructive environments such as Salem House and
Murdstone and Grinby’s, has little control over his own destiny. The young Pip, who is
abused by Mrs. Joe, manipulated by Miss Havisham, and ridiculed by Estella, is equally
vulnerable. The authority necessary to tell their own stories stems in part from the authority
they are able to attain by gaining control over their own lives. As such, the narrative voices
of the two characters are central to the very fabric of the novels—Pip and David’s journeys
can only be fully appreciated through the reader’s ability to trace their respective evolutions
from heroes to narrators.

This immediately complicates the process of adapting these two novels into other forms of
entertainment. Only the original textual medium, which allows the first-person narrator to
retrace and reflect on his life story, can fully display the symbiotic relationship between
hero/protagonist and narrator/protagonist through the constant presence of the character’s
narrative voice. The fact that narrative authority emerges from character authority in the
final chapters of both novels makes it clear that both the bildungsromans and the
autobiographical narratives are essential to the meanings of the two works.

Though several film and stage versions of *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations* try
to integrate some of David and Pip’s narrations through the use of voice-over, most of the
characters’ autobiographies are forfeited in live-action adaptations—visual mediums cannot
convey the incremental development of the characters’ narrative authority in the same way
that it is presented in the texts through the constant presence of the heroes’ voices. While the
viewer can still appreciate their journeys from the naiveté of childhood to the understanding
of adulthood, the true scope of their matrurations is imperfect without the presence of their
narrative voices. Consequently, in film versions, the intimacy between the narrator and the
reader is lost.
Two musical stage adaptations of the novel have complicated the question of whether or not an adaptor can successfully incorporate both incarnations of David and Pip into his or her particular version of the text. Just as first-person novels can be divided into two different time continuums, story time (the time in which the storyteller was acting the part of the hero and experiencing all the adventures being recounted) and narrative time (the time in which the storyteller, now no longer the hero but the narrator, recounts his story), musicals are also divided into two different continuums: libretto time (the spoken element) and lyric time (the musical element).1 When a character sings solo onstage, it is akin to a narrative tangent in literature, as the story is briefly halted so that music can take over and convey thoughts or feelings. The idea of an autobiographical, first-person storyteller is thus somewhat difficult to capture onstage given the fact that a musical often involves multiple narrative viewpoints—in most musicals, many different characters sing solo numbers which allows for a wide variety of voices to dictate the shape of the story. In Oliver! (1960), Oliver, Nancy, the Dodger, Fagin, and Sikes all briefly take control of the narrative when they sing their solo numbers, and the idioms and melodies employed by the different characters reflect their personalities. While the ability of a character in a musical to sing solo presents the opportunity for a more engaging form of narration than voice-over, there are likewise numerous difficulties involved in trying to present a first-person narrator in musical theater. In his book on writing for musical theater, Allen Cohen points out that dramatic works, such as films or other plays, are usually better sources for musical adaptation than non-dramatic works like novels because, “in literary fiction….much of what the main characters experience is internal—psychological and emotional—which makes it extremely difficult to translate into theatrical terms. Some internal monologues, of course, can be translated into

1 McMillin addresses this theory in depth in The Musical as Drama.
solo songs, but to have more than a couple of them in a show would create monotony” (52). Here, Cohen underscores the difficulties faced by writers in adapting novels like *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations* for the musical stage, as the first-person narratives create a heavy degree of internalization within the novel even as the characters are engaged in dynamic, externalized adventures. The reflective tone of David and Pip’s narratives creates the pitfall of “monotony” that Cohen warns of in his text. Since David and Pip are at the center of their respective novels, incorporating their narrative voices means that most of the songs would have to revolve around what the two of them are thinking and feeling, and yet, it is impossible to have them sing the entire score.

The 1981 musical adaptation of *David Copperfield* simply called *Copperfield* and a 1975 musical adaptation of *Great Expectations* are both affected by these limitations, though the composers and librettists behind both adaptations find different ways of trying to overcome the difficulties posed by the first-person narratives presented in the sources. Joel Hirschhorn and Al Kasha, the songwriting team behind *Copperfield*, choose the most obvious solution to the narrative problem posed by the original novel: they eliminate David’s role as narrator entirely. Though two different incarnations of the character are presented in the show, the young David who must deal with the death of his mother and the tyranny of the Murdstones, and the older David who must overcome Uriah Heep and arrive at some conclusion regarding his feelings for Dora and Agnes, there is never any attempt to link the two through an overarching narrative voice. Rather, both versions of the character are protagonists as opposed to a protagonist/narrator combination. Omitting the role of David, the narrator, weakens the significance of the story, for his reflections regarding his own development are essential to the bildungsroman as written by Dickens. Cyril Ornadel and Hal Sharper, the
composer and librettist for the 1975 musical adaptation of Great Expectations, present a more experimental approach to the incorporation of Pip’s narrative. As in Copperfield, the protagonist is divided into two separate characters: Young Pip and Adult Pip. Rather than eliminate the character’s role as narrator, the creative team includes parts of Pip’s narrative throughout the adaptation, as the older Pip provides narrative commentary during the early scenes in the musical while he watches his younger self interact with Joe, Mrs. Joe, Miss Havisham, and Estella. Pip also occasionally sings solo in his role as narrator, thus making the audience privy to his thoughts and feelings. Nevertheless, Ornadel and Sharper are unable to duplicate the effect of Pip’s narration from the original novel due in part to the medium in which they are working. While two incarnations of Pip are presented onstage, the adaptation never captures the sense of symbiosis between Pip the protagonist and Pip the narrator, as the two incarnations of the character never actually sing together. Furthermore, by allowing other characters to sing solo while Pip is not onstage, Ornadel and Sharper reduce the character’s narrative authority. An analysis of these two musicals underscores the difficulties of translating the narratives of Dickens’s novels into other media, though the conservative approach taken by the two creative teams prevented a true exploration of the narrative potential that exists within music. Had these two teams been willing to take greater musical risks, they might have been able to come up with some truly innovative ways of layering the two incarnations of Dickens’s characters—protagonists and narrators—musically.

Joel Hirschhorn and Al Kasha’s Copperfield ran for just thirteen performances on Broadway in 1981. Producers had been hoping to create the next Oliver!, but Copperfield never even came close to matching Oliver!’s popularity. Between the poor reviews it
received from New York theater critics, and the fact that the 1980s would prove an especially
difficult decade for many shows to find success on Broadway in spite of (or perhaps because of) the mega-musical trend that began to dominate, it is not surprising that *Copperfield*
closed so suddenly after its debut. Like all adaptors of Dickens, Hirschhorn and Kasha faced
the challenge of condensing the author’s epic stories to manageable proportions—a
particularly difficult task in this case since *David Copperfield* is one of the longest works in
the Dickens canon. Nevertheless, even though *Oliver Twist* is significantly shorter than
*David Copperfield*, Lionel Bart had to go about condensing this novel as well when adapting
it for the stage. One of the most effective elements of Bart’s approach to this task was his
focus on a central theme: Oliver’s search for love. Hirschhorn and Kasha’s inability to create
a similar thematic focus through the preservation of David’s narrative voice undoubtedly
weakens the overall meaning of the story.

The early chapters of *David Copperfield* are driven by the idea of a paradise that is lost, or
rather, forcefully obliterated. The moment that the Murdstones enter David’s life, his idyllic
childhood in Blunderstone is shattered. As he is abused and degraded by his stepfather, the
reader begins to comprehend that David’s life will never be the same again, even if he is able
to escape the Murdstones. David himself is keenly aware of this fact, and throughout the
entire novel, there is a sense that David will forever be haunted by the memory of a lost ideal.
Of course, losing this ideal is what allows the hero to try and come to a clearer understanding
of his place in the world, and the main theme of Dickens’s text is undoubtedly centered on
David’s struggle to understand his own heart. Gwendolyn B. Needham writes that “the
theme of the undisciplined heart [is] implicit from the beginning” (47), even though it is not
explicitly discussed until Annie Strong’s “confession” scene late in the novel. Many of the
characters in the novel can be divided into two or three categories: those who have
disciplined their hearts, those who remain undisciplined, and those who, like David, are
trying to find the proper balance. David is clearly an emotional character, and his narrative is
shaped heavily by his feelings, whether it is his aversion toward the Murdstones, his
admiration of his aunt, his heartbreak at Steerforth’s betrayal, and his love for both Dora and
Agnes. His emotionalism makes him admirable and sympathetic, but simultaneously
vulnerable, as it leaves him open to the abuses of the Murdstones, and later, to the
manipulations of Steerforth whom he unthinkingly places on a pedestal. Indeed, the negative
results of acting with an undisciplined heart are repeatedly emphasized throughout the novel.
Graham Storey writes that “this theme is central to the structure of the novel. It links David’s
mother and her disastrous remarriage; Annie Strong’s sufferings from her early infatuation
for the ignoble Jack Maldon; Betsey Trotwood’s fears from her mysterious, worthless
husband; above all, David’s uncritical worship of Steerforth, which leads to Emily’s
seduction and the end of the Peggottys’s happiness” (44). Consequently, David’s eventual
desire to discipline his own heart is understandable—doing so will leave him less open to
exploitation and allow him to move forward with his life in a positive direction. It is this
lack of discipline that spells certain doom for two women that David loves: his mother, Clara
Copperfield, and his first wife, Dora Spenlow. Clara’s openheartedness places her fully in
the power of the people who will ultimately destroy her, while Dora’s lack of discipline is
similarly problematic in that she is unable to cope with the pressures brought on by marriage.

David’s efforts to discipline his heart often produce favorable results. Needham notes that
it is only by disciplining his heart that David comes to understand Steerforth’s faults and
Traddles’s merits—as a schoolboy, and later, as a young man, he mistakenly favors the
former over the latter despite the fact that Traddles was always the superior companion (53).

Similarly, it is by disciplining his heart that David comes to understand the critical role that Agnes has played in his life along with her love for him, which in turn allows him to acknowledge his own feelings for her. Nevertheless, the reader always remains keenly aware of the fact that David’s desire to discipline his heart places him on a slippery slope, as that same discipline could evolve into the caustic firmness that defines the personalities of the Murdstones.

James R. Kincaid wholly rejects the necessity of David having to discipline his heart, and ultimately labels his attempts to do so as destructive: “It has struck many readers that this is a terribly reductive formula for a humane and responsive existence, that it is priggish, escapist, ugly, and narrow, that it denies the values that count—those of Dora, the Micawbers, and Mr. Dick—and that this ‘disciplining’ is partly a euphemism for desensitizing, falsifying, sentimentalizing” (164). While it is obvious that some of David’s setbacks are caused by his emotional openness, Kincaid notes that the protagonist’s attempts to gain control of his emotions create different types of problems—in several instances, David’s passivity seems partially attributable to his determination to discipline himself, while undisciplined characters, such as Mr. Micawber and Mr. Dick, are active and proactive agents who manage to accomplish a great deal of good.² Kincaid ultimately asserts that the pervasive sense of melancholy that haunts David Copperfield is not only attributable to the lead character’s lost childhood, but simultaneously to his “pathetically ironic drift towards Murdstonean

² Kincaid includes Traddles and Mr. Peggotty in this assessment, though the assertion that these two characters are “undisciplined” seems open to question, as Traddles shows a great deal of discipline in his patient relationship with Sophy, while Mr. Peggotty’s devotion to Em’ly is likewise indicative of steadfastness, even if it is a steadfastness governed by powerful emotions.
firmness” (166). Though everything seems to work out very well for David in the end, Kincaid and other critics have asserted that the hero’s happy ending is tainted.

The fact that critics continue to debate the necessity of David’s journey toward discipline reinforces the importance of this subject to the very fabric of the novel. Depicting this struggle in live-action adaptations of the story is difficult, however, for the constant presence of the narrator’s voice—David’s voice—is essential to understanding this conflict. David’s own reflections provide many details regarding the contrast between Murdstonean firmness and Micawber-esque absurdity. Furthermore, David’s self-assessments as per this issue are likewise revealing, particularly in the chapters that focus on his marriage to Dora:

“The first mistaken impulse of an undisciplined heart.” Those words of Mrs. Strong’s were constantly recurring to me, at this time; were almost always present to my mind. I awoke with them, often, in the night; I remember to have even read them, in dreams, inscribed upon the walls of houses. For I knew, now, that my own heart was undisciplined when it first loved Dora; and that if it had been disciplined, it never could have felt, when we were married, what it had felt in its secret experience.

“There can be no disparity in marriage, like unsuitability of mind and purpose.” Those words I remembered too. I had endeavoured to adapt Dora to myself, and found it impracticable. It remained for me to adapt myself to Dora; to share with her what I could, and be happy; to bear on my own shoulders what I must, and be happy still. This was the discipline to which I tried to bring my heart, when I began to think. (788-789)

While a stage or film version of the story can certainly capture the humorous frustrations of this relationship, David’s narrative commentary can only be preserved through voice-over, a technique which must be used sparingly. As such, the depth of David’s reflections on the state of his marriage, and likewise, the state of his own heart, are lost.

Whereas a film must rely on plodding voice-over, the musical genre opens up various possibilities for a more dynamic incorporation of David’s role as narrator—a musical can utilize engaging songs and melodies to convey the subtle, interior elements of David’s story.
In *Copperfield*, however, Kasha and Hirschhorn decide not to explore these possibilities and take a simplistic approach to David’s story and the musical potential contained within it. Kasha and Hirschhorn eliminate David’s role as narrator altogether, a subject that will be discussed in detail later in the chapter. Though the complete excision of the narrative voice is a questionable choice, the conventions of the musical genre still grant the two writers various opportunities to reveal David’s inner struggles to the audience through song. As mentioned, when a character sings solo in a musical, he or she effectively takes over the narrative for that portion of the show. Thus, solo numbers sung by David could effectively capture the essence of his narrative reflections by making the viewer privy to his thoughts, even if he is not consciously (and retrospectively) telling his story as a narrator.

Surprisingly, the writers do not take advantage of this opportunity, and the musical breakdown of the score reveals several curious choices on the part of the creative team. Table 7.1 features a short overview of the musical numbers to *Copperfield*, detailing which songs are sung by which characters throughout the adaptation. What is most revealing about this breakdown is the fact that David only sings solo twice: once as a child, and once more as an adult. Thus, there is only one real opportunity for Kasha and Hirschhorn to convey David’s reflections on the state of his own heart—in the novel, such reflections are constantly placed within the grasp of the reader. David’s two solo numbers ultimately provide little insight into his conflicts regarding firmness and love, as the child David cannot ruminate on the struggle to find a balance between the two because he has not yet experienced enough of life to understand the contrast. Thus, “Anyone” is presented solely as a manifestation of the child’s pleas for compassion: “Is there anyone/Anyone to guide me?/Is there anyone/Willing to stand beside me?/Is there just one heart/I can be a part of?/Is there
anyone who won’t turn me away?/Who is waiting to say/I want you to stay here forever” (1.7.33). The sentimental pathos here is understandable, as a number sung by the abused and vulnerable Young David should place its central emphasis on this kind of raw emotionalism given the boy’s many troubles. However, “With the One I Love,” which is sung by the adult David, is equally steeped in pathos as it is sung immediately following Dora’s death and revolves around David’s reflections regarding the loss of his beloved “child-wife”: “Now that I can buy her flowers/Give her lace and pink chiffon/Now that I can buy her diamonds/She’s not here—she’s gone” (2-7-30A). Despite the fact that David has now grown up, he is still defined by pure emotionalism as opposed to inner conflict or cogitation. Rather than present the more cerebral topic of David’s efforts to balance emotion with control, Kasha and Hirschhorn opt to focus solely on the demonstrative elements of the character’s personality—there is little reflection or rumination in these solo numbers, and David comes across simply as a sentimental young man as opposed to a conscientious and thoughtful individual trying to uncover the truths of the human heart. While it is clearly difficult to capture the subtle nuances of Dickens’s characterization of the hero, especially with the absence of the character’s narrative voice, the musical possibilities inherent in this characterization clearly could have been explored in greater depth by the show’s writers.

Although it would be impossible for David to sing every song in the play as a solo, a greater number of solo songs would open up opportunities for Kasha and Hirschhorn to incorporate more of David’s inner struggles into the adaptation, and thus, to include more of Dickens’s very human portrait of the lead character into the play. Though the central theme of the

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Many critics condemned this song as being derivative of *Oliver!*’s “Where is Love?”, and Kasha himself later stated that, in retrospect, “it’s a little too close to ‘Where is Love?’…the emotion is the same.”
original novel centers on David’s inner conflicts, that theme is virtually nonexistent in the show.

Table 7.1 Musical Breakdown of Copperfield

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Song</th>
<th>Main Performer</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 I Don’t Want a Boy</td>
<td>Betsey, Peggotty, Chorus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Mama, Don’t Get Married</td>
<td>Young David, Clara, Peggotty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Copperfield</td>
<td>Young David, Quinion, Chorus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Something Will Turn Up</td>
<td>Mr. Micawber, Young David, Chorus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Anyone</td>
<td>Young David</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Here’s a Book</td>
<td>Betsey, Mr. Dick, Young David</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Here’s a Book (reprise)</td>
<td>Betsey, Mr. Dick, David</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Umble</td>
<td>Uriah Heep and Mrs. Heep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Circle Waltz</td>
<td>David, Dora, Agnes, Chorus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Up the Ladder</td>
<td>Uriah Heep and Mr. Micawber</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 I Wish He Knew</td>
<td>Agnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 The Lights of London</td>
<td>David, Dora, Chorus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Umble (reprise)</td>
<td>Uriah Heep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Something Will Turn Up</td>
<td>Mr. Micawber, David</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Villainy is the Matter</td>
<td>Uriah Heep, Mr. Micawber, David</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 With The One I Love</td>
<td>David</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 Something Will Turn Up</td>
<td>Mr. Micawber, Chorus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 Anyone (reprise)</td>
<td>David and Agnes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unsurprisingly, Hirschhorn and Kasha thus choose to provide their musical incarnation of David with especially easy solutions to all of his problems. In the novel, the tensions regarding the disciplining of David’s heart are epitomized by his relationships with Dora and Agnes. As the above quote from the novel reveals, David’s loving yet frustrating first marriage is defined in part by his realization that his heart was undisciplined when he fell in love with Dora and that the burdens of married life will have to fall squarely on his shoulders due to Dora’s own inability to cope with these pressures. His second marriage to Agnes is marked by the maturity of both characters, and Agnes’s conscientiousness repeatedly stands in contrast to Dora’s flightiness.
Nevertheless, Dickens never resorts to depicting Dora as a negative presence in David’s life, nor does he create an antagonistic relationship between Dora and Agnes—though many readers have understandably criticized the amiable friendship presented between the two women as insincere. Nevertheless, by keeping Dora loveable in spite of her weaknesses, Dickens presents a far more interesting and complicated love triangle. Though it is easy to view David and Agnes as being “meant for one another,” David’s more playful and innocent relationship with Dora has an appeal of its own that at times seems to supersede the practicality of his marriage to Agnes. Kincaid writes that Dora, in many ways, epitomizes both the idyllic world of Blunderstone in the days before the arrival of the Murdstones and the loving frivolity embodied by the Micawbers: “Dora certainly recalls the boy’s equally lovely and fragile mother. David is reaching for an Eden that was once there but can be no longer, not so much because he senses any pattern of incest but because he is not allowed to accept the Micawber values which Dora holds. She does, however, impress them on him for a time” (189). Storey likewise notes that Dora’s childishness is attractive in spite of the frustrations it causes, for “a bildungsroman can cherish immaturity, too; countering the criticism of the ‘undisciplined heart,’ Dickens was honest—or realistic—enough to show us…Dora’s palpable charms” (44). In spite of Agnes’s innumerable good qualities, there is a definite sense that David’s marriage to Dora is the more dynamic of the two relationships—this despite the fact that David, Dora, and the reader are all left with doubts regarding the ultimate sustainability of the marriage in the long run. Nevertheless, Robin Gilmour echoes Kincaid’s assertions by noting that “although Dickens brings his novelist-hero to rest in the schematic marriage with Agnes—a marriage which offers the ‘reward’ of prudent domesticity—at the same time he manages to suggest the losses, the compensations, the
imaginative impoverishment which this final position involves” (108). Agnes repeatedly represents a break with the romantic past, whether it is through her disapproval of Steerforth or her eventual replacement of Dora. Conversely, two chapters which focus almost exclusively on Dora are written in the beautiful retrospective format that David employs when summarizing especially memorable moments in his life. Dickens thus highlights Dora’s connection with the idealized past, and David himself evokes such sentiments when retrospectively chronicling his wedding day—he is not simply remembering it but simultaneously reliving it: “I have stood aside to see the phantoms of those days go by me. They are gone, and I resume the journey of my story” (715). Dora presents David with perhaps his only chance to fully recapture the essence of what was taken from him in his childhood, though it is ultimately a futile endeavor.

Consequently, there is a realistic and complicated level of ambiguity that runs through *David Copperfield*, as epitomized in his relationships with the two women with whom he falls in love. This ambiguity seems to fit in perfectly with both the bildungsroman theme and the first-person narrative—David’s journey through life is complicated, and his reflections on the nature of the human heart are equally complicated. Dora’s eventual death, frequently decried as nothing more than a convenient plot device, allows Dickens to get David and Agnes together without having to address some of the more difficult questions regarding David’s first marriage and its potential. Nevertheless, by keeping Dora sympathetic and charming, Dickens does not reduce her to a mere placeholder for Agnes. Rather, the relationship between David and Dora plays a significant role in David’s determination to discover the truth of his own heart.
Since Hirschhorn and Kasha present their David with very few opportunities to reflect on his relationships, their simplified approach to the depiction of his marriages is understandable. Rather than allow the young hero to contemplate the inner workings of his own heart through reflective solo numbers, which could theoretically substitute for the absence of the narrator in this adaptation, the composers simply stress that David is meant to be with Agnes (who is overtly pining for him from the very moment she is introduced), and that all he needs to do is come to this realization in order to attain his “happily ever after” ending. Dora is thus treated as an inconvenient distraction and her role in the play is almost antagonistic in spite of her loveable personality, as David’s relationship with her prevents his getting together with Agnes early in the piece. There is thus little sympathy for Dora, and Betsey is actually depicted as disliking her:

DAVID
I know Dora will do anything to help me succeed.

AUNT BETSEY
I want you to delay this marriage. I demand you wait.

DAVID
You have no right to demand that.

AUNT BETSEY
I have every right. I am your aunt. I raised you….I am asking you not to marry Miss Dora Spenlow. (2.1.9)

Betsey’s reasons for disapproving of the engagement are based entirely on her desire to see David marry Agnes. The composers repeatedly imply that this is the proper outcome for the hero, and never more so than in this same scene between Betsey and David, which concludes with Agnes singing her big solo number: “I Wish He Knew.” By giving Agnes the chance to sing of her feelings for David to the audience, Kasha and Hirschhorn place even further emphasis on the idea that the two characters are meant to be, but in so doing, they undermine
Dora’s significance entirely, reducing her from a fully realized influence on David’s life to an unwanted precursor to the hero’s relationship with Agnes. Tellingly, Dora is never allowed to sing solo regarding her own feelings for David, and the audience’s sympathy thus lies squarely with Agnes due simply to the fact that the viewer is made privy to the inner workings of the character’s mind through her solo. Since Dora is incapable of using music in a private and reflective way, there is no chance for the audience to truly understand her or her effect on David.

Even more frustrating is David’s own lack of solo numbers, as some sort of musical reflection on his feelings for Dora and Agnes, and how these feelings have complicated his understanding of his own heart, would inestimably help to heighten the audience’s interest in the hero. Whereas the reader is granted unrestricted access to David’s hopes, fears, wants, pleasures, and pains, thus creating an intimate relationship between reader and hero/narrator, the viewer is never given such freedom and David’s feelings regarding his relationships with Dora and Agnes remain undisclosed. Worse yet, since this version of Agnes is portrayed as so overtly in love with David, the viewer cannot help but view the protagonist as being a bit dense for his failure to acknowledge her. In the straightforward and thematically uncomplicated world of this musical, the viewer is simply eager for David to come to the realization that Agnes is the right girl for him. None of the ambiguity or sophistication of the love triangle, as it was depicted by Dickens, is preserved due in large part to the fact that this David is incapable of contemplating the mysteries of his own heart through musical expression. Once Dora is dispensed with in the show’s penultimate scene, David can marry Agnes in the very next scene without having done any true soul searching on the matter; indeed, David seems so ready to put Dora behind him that the final verse to “With the One I
“Love” seems to imply that he is already thinking of proposing to Agnes. This oversimplified depiction of David’s life, and moreover, David’s heart, prevents the musical version of the character from achieving anywhere near the same level of poignancy and vitality as his literary predecessor.

Here it is also worth noting that in order to condense Dickens’s mammoth novel, Hirschhorn and Kasha completely excise most of the story’s subplots, including the tumultuous love affair between James Steerforth and Little Em’ly. The omission of the Steerforth story arc contributes to the oversimplified tenor of the piece, particularly regarding the characterization of David. Although this storyline is peripheral to the central plot of David’s maturation, the subplot underscores the theme of disciplining one’s heart. Whereas the lack of discipline exhibited by Mr. Micawber, Mrs. Micawber, and Mr. Dick is harmless, Steerforth, Em’ly, Mrs. Steerforth, and Rosa Dartle all possess destructively unrestrained hearts in that they actively bring about significant pain for other characters. Needham writes that most of the characters involved in the Steerforth subplot are “marred by the ‘alloy of self,’ [and] exemplify the misery to which the undisciplined heart can doom itself and bring innocent victims” (53). All of these characters thus find it difficult to achieve any sort of lasting happiness. As mentioned, it is an indication of David’s own lack of discipline that he fails to perceive the danger posed by Steerforth, particularly in regards to his relationship with Em’ly. Eventually, David must reflect on the sad states of these individuals, and he reevaluates his understanding of himself as a result. The elimination of these characters reinforces the musical’s central flaw: David attains his happy ending without truly reflecting on the nature of his own heart. Incorporating the subplot would have forced Hirschhorn and Kasha to write some serious songs for their musical hero, thus adding a true sense of gravitas.
to David’s struggle to discover the truth about the human heart by reexamining his relationships with the likes of Steerforth, Rosa, and Em’ly. It also would have given him the chance to sing some songs befitting of his role as the insightful protagonist (if not his role as reflective narrator), for he could have reflected on his friend’s betrayal through song. Here, the number of songs sung by Uriah Heep and Mr. Micawber becomes questionable, for although these characters are especially memorable and present numerous musical possibilities given their singular methods of expressing themselves, they do not necessarily exert the same level of influence on David’s maturation as Steerforth. The Micawber/Heep subplot is largely divorced from the story of David’s development until late in the novel. Sacrificing the Steerforth storyline so as to include several lively yet nonessential songs sung by the comical supporting characters reinforces the adaptation’s lack of focus on David’s growth. While Mr. Micawber’s loving irresponsibility plays a role in shaping David, it is Steerforth’s betrayal more than Micawber’s behavior that directly reinforces the theme of David’s disciplining his heart.

While Kasha and Hirschhorn’s decision to limit the quantity and content of David’s solo numbers prevents the character from conveying his feelings regarding his relationships with other characters such as Dora and Agnes, the complete removal of David’s role as narrator is most pronounced in the relationship between the two different incarnations of the hero presented on stage: Young David and Adult David. Genette’s argument regarding the first-person narrator and the protagonist’s gradual progression from hero to storyteller seems to reemphasize the idea that a live action adaptation of a novel like *David Copperfield* cannot capture the narrative nuances inherent in the original text. The conventions of musical theater once again create interesting possibilities for overcoming the disparity between these
two forms of storytelling, for musicals, unlike movies or straight plays, allow for a layering of voices. In a film or a straight play, two characters cannot speak at the same time and be understood. Conversely, musicals and operas allow for a more organic and coherent layering of voices through the medium of music itself. Characters can sing together onstage, even if they are not singing the exact same words or melodies, and still be understood.

The idea of multiple versions of David singing together is interesting given that the reader meets several different Davids over the course of the novel. There is David: the narrator, David: the child, David: the adult protagonist, and so on. Of course, they are all part of the same individual, but each one has certain qualities that distinguish him. While Genette’s theory stresses the cohesion that is eventually created through a first-person narrator, Malcolm Andrews notes that some of these incarnations of the character seem incompatible, as adult-protagonist David works toward disciplining his heart, and thus turns his back on some of the innocent joys of his childhood. Conversely, adult-narrator David seems to have a very strong connection with his childhood, as is evident in his narration of the novel’s early chapters: “The adult narrator David who responds so strongly to the idea of the Devonshire girls and children’s songs among the dry-law stationers is one in whom the spirit of childhood is very much alive. But there is little trace of this in the adult figure within the story who marries Agnes, wins fame as an author and presides over a family in his London drawing room” (Grown Up 170). Andrews’s conclusions highlight the complicated relationship that exists between the different incarnations of David presented throughout the novel. Thus, the idea of various versions of the character singing together onstage, whether they are made aware of one another’s presence or not, presents a creative solution to the problem of how to depict David’s maturation into the role of narrator.
The potential of having the two different incarnations of David presented in *Copperfield* singing together onstage is also enticing because memory plays an especially important role in the novel. In *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels*, J. Hillis Miller asserts that memory is the unifying thread of the text, as “all David’s memories are linked to one another. Any one point radiates backward and forward in a multitudinous web connecting it to past and future” (155), and David himself comments on the centrality of memory to his narrative in the second chapter of the novel: “I think the memory of most of us can go farther back into such times than many of us suppose; just as I believe the power of observation in numbers of very young children to be quite wonderful for its closeness and accuracy” (15). Rather than simply recount his memories of life with his mother and Peggotty, David actually seems to experience these sights, sounds, and sensations all over again. He writes in the present tense, thus underscoring the timeless, idyllic quality of Blunderstone before the arrival of the Murdstones, and describes everything as if he is seeing it for the first time:

And now I see the outside of our house, with the latticed bedroom-windows standing open to let in the sweet-smelling air, and the ragged old rooks’-nests still dangling in the elm-trees at the bottom of the front garden. Now I am in the garden at the back, beyond the yard where the empty pigeon-house and dog-kennel are - a very preserve of butterflies, as I remember it, with a high fence, and a gate and padlock; where the fruit clusters on the trees, riper and richer than fruit has ever been since, in any other garden, and where my mother gathers some in a basket, while I stand by, bolting furtive gooseberries, and trying to look unmoved. A great wind rises, and the summer is gone in a moment. We are playing in the winter twilight, dancing about the parlour. When my mother is out of breath and rests herself in an elbow-chair, I watch her winding her bright curls round her fingers, and straitening her waist, and nobody knows better than I do that she likes to look so well, and is proud of being so pretty. (17-18)

The adult David’s memories and reflections regarding his childhood are frequently cited as examples of some of Dickens’s most exquisite and insightful prose, as he successfully merges the childhood impressions of the young David with the imaginative and retrospective narration of the adult narrator: “What Dickens caught best in the opening number (Chapters
is a child’s sense of wonder, beautifully recorded in David’s memories of his home at Blunderstone” (Storey 24). This merger of the child’s observations and the adult’s memories, as presented by Dickens, creates a myriad of musical possibilities, for to have the Young David and Adult David sing together would allow for a musical variation on both Dickens’s beautiful narrative prose (which is heavily shaped by both elements of David’s personality) and Genette’s theories regarding the gradual merging between the hero and the narrator. Disappointingly, Kasha and Hirschhorn do not experiment with these narrative possibilities in the musical—rather, they take the most simple approach possible to depicting David’s maturation, switching from one version of the character to the other without even addressing the subject of David’s role as narrator.

Conversely, in their 1975 musical version of *Great Expectations* (which, unlike *Copperfield*, never actually reached Broadway), Hal Sharper and Cyril Ornadel are certain to incorporate Pip’s narration into the adaptation. They also explore some of the narrative possibilities that are opened up by the form in which they are writing, though, as in the case of *Copperfield*, the two incarnations of the hero presented in the musical (Young Pip and Adult Pip) never actually sing together. Furthermore, Pip’s narrative authority is never firmly established due in part to the fact that other characters sing solo throughout the adaptation—as such, Pip does not maintain exclusive control over the narrative. In spite of these limitations, Sharper and Ornadel deserve a good deal of credit for their determination to preserve the role of the narrator in their adaptation, particularly when one considers that Pip’s narrative voice in *Great Expectations* is even more vivid than David’s.

Whereas David reflects on his past with an overriding sense of fond nostalgia, Pip’s recollections evolve from a good-humored sympathy with his younger self into an
overwhelming sense of disapproval and guilt over the way he treated his friends and family upon coming into his expectations. While David can take pride in the fact that “whatever I have tried to do in life, I have tried with all my heart to do well; that whatever I have devoted myself to, I have devoted myself to completely; that in great aims and in small, I have always been thoroughly in earnest” (684), Pip must acknowledge that he has made many mistakes over the course of his life, and likewise, that he has been permanently injured by some of the setbacks he has suffered. There is something almost confessional about Pip’s narrative, and the fact that he rarely goes off on tangents, as opposed to David who spends a great deal of time talking about other characters and situations not directly connected to him, underscores this point. Sadrin writes that “Pip’s book…is much too intensely and narrowly autobiographical, in fact too little digressive, to allow at all for extraneous developments and Pip is at his best and most convincing when he talks about himself. This he often does superbly, and in his own voice. Or, rather, his own voices, for polymodality is his favourite mode of expression, best suited as it is to confessional writings” (Expectations 187). Of course, the centrality of Pip’s narrative “voices” makes theatrical adaptation of this particular novel even more complicated.

Though Great Expectations has been adapted for film and television numerous times, it has never had the extensive stage life of other novels in the Dickens canon. In Dickens Dramatized, Bolton describes this novel as being fundamentally “untheatrical” (416), for the dramatic and engrossing plot to Great Expectations is of secondary importance to the focus on the growth of the protagonist as epitomized by his first-person narrative. As in David Copperfield, numerous versions of Pip are brought into contact in Great Expectations, and a sort of dialogue is established between them, though the contrasts between these incarnations
of the character are even more apparent: “Pip’s narrative, as we have had many occasions to note, offers innumerable instances of such complex dialogues between the knowing, mellowed, moralizing voice of the elderly narrator and the eager, ignorant, anxious voice of the hero still enmeshed in the action” (Sadrin Expectations 187). The potential for duets between the young and older versions of the hero/narrator becomes even more fascinating in regard to Great Expectations than David Copperfield, for there is not the same sense of harmonious maturation—whereas two different incarnations of David could conceivably sing to the same melody, Pip’s younger and older selves would undoubtedly diverge significantly in their views, hopes, values, and expectations. Sharper and Ornadel make various attempts to incorporate Pip’s narration into the adaptation, though their approach to this facet of the story remains somewhat conservative, and, in the latter stages of the show, decidedly utilitarian.

The play begins with Adult Pip speaking the opening lines to the novel just before his younger self encounters Magwitch in the churchyard. The sight of the older Pip watching himself interact with other characters is an interesting visual and helps to convey some of Genette’s ideas regarding the evolution of the protagonist toward the narrator: the audience is made aware from the beginning that the main purpose of the story is to move Pip forward from a vulnerable and unknowing child to a more empowered and reflective individual. Throughout the early scenes in the adaptation, older Pip provides plot exposition, introduces characters, and even manages to insert some narrative commentary through song. During the musical’s opening number, as Mrs. Joe, Mr. Wopsle, Uncle Pumblechook, and Joe all sing of their feelings toward the young Pip, Adult Pip interjects a quick verse of his own in which he muses on his inability to understand how everyone except Joe seemed to dislike him.
Although Young Pip is onstage during the song, Sharper and Ornadel do not allow the two characters to sing together despite the fact that the narrator is helping to convey his younger self’s feelings to the audience; a duet of some kind would help to epitomize the idea of the merger of voices that takes place in an autobiographical narrative. Nevertheless, Adult Pip still fulfills part of his role as narrator here, singing in the capacity of a storyteller and revealing the frustrations that he was forced to experience as a child. Furthermore, their singing together does not seem necessary at this point, as Adult Pip sings about what his younger self was feeling at the time—having them sing the exact same lyrics to the exact same melody would be somewhat superfluous.

Adult Pip’s role as narrator becomes even more significant later in the first act following Young Pip’s first visit to Satis House. The first two Satis House scenes, as depicted in the novel, are combined into one so as to save time: Pip’s introduction to Miss Havisham and Estella, his humiliation while playing Beggar My Neighbor, his brief encounter with Jaggers, his fistfight with Herbert Pocket, and his first kiss with Estella are all included in this initial visit. At the end of the scene, following Pip’s tearful departure after being mocked by Estella, Adult Pip once again provides commentary through song, though this time, rather than simply singing one verse of a song, he is given an entire number: “One Kiss.” In this song, Adult Pip reflects on his early fascination with Estella, singing about what he experienced as a child from the perspective of an adult: “One kiss, how it changed me so/One smile, one shining summer gone/One smile, still leading me on and on/One heart that I could never touch/Was I mad to see so much?/In one kiss, one smile/In one word: Estella!/Estella!” (emphases added). Pip’s retrospective questioning of his own youthful feelings toward
Estella is in keeping with his literary predecessor’s habit of trying to rationalize these same feelings in light of the fact that she never truly justified his having placed her on a pedestal:

And now, because my mind was not confused enough before, I complicated its confusion fifty thousand-fold, by having states and seasons when I was clear that Biddy was immeasurably better than Estella, and that the plain honest working life to which I was born, had nothing in it to be ashamed of, but offered me sufficient means of self-respect and happiness. At those times, I would decide conclusively that my disaffection to dear old Joe and the forge, was gone, and that I was growing up in a fair way to be partners with Joe and to keep company with Biddy - when all in a moment some confounding remembrance of the Havisham days would fall upon me, like a destructive missile, and scatter my wits again. (105)

In spite of his increased level of insight, the adult narrator is never quite able to arrive at a complete understanding regarding what perpetuated his infatuation with Estella, and having the adult version of Pip sing about this infatuation while watching his younger self interact with the girl is a creative visual and auditory technique for conveying the narrative pattern of the early chapters of *Great Expectations*. The song helps to communicate the same sense of nostalgia, insight, curiosity, and ultimately, confusion, which defines this part of Pip’s narrative.

Sharper and Ornadel were clearly cognizant of the interesting possibilities posed by the inclusion of Pip: the narrator, and they continue to toy with these possibilities in the early scenes of the first act. This experimentation is most pronounced during the song entitled “Flags,” in which Young Pip lies to Mrs. Joe, Joe, Pumblechook, and Wopsle about his experiences at Satis and sings a marching song about the games he played with Estella. In the middle of the song, Pip interjects to help his younger self, and the intrusion is acknowledged by the other characters:

**YOUNG PIP**
There was one enormous cake
Twice as big as a cat
And it was like a dream
ADULT PIP
Covered in cream.

YOUNG PIP, JOE, MRS. JOE, WOPSLE, PUMBLECHOOK
Who said that?

The interruption is meant to be humorous, and though the actual joke is somewhat ridiculous, it does reinforce the writers’ determination to include Pip’s narrative voice in their adaptation: since Pip is telling his own story, it is only natural that he should have the power to interpret, interrupt, and interject, even while other characters are singing. Nevertheless, this power is limited to the scenes in which his younger self is onstage. During various solo numbers sung by other characters, Pip, the narrator, disappears, and his power over the narrative is reduced significantly, as will be discussed later.

In comparison to Kasha and Hirschhorn’s approach to David’s narrative, Sharper and Ornadel took a more experimental approach to the preservation of Pip’s narrative voice in their musical, though Pip’s role as narrator is reduced significantly following the transition from the younger version of the character to the older version. Once Pip grows up, there is only the single version of the character left: Adult Pip, who continues to double as the narrator sporadically. At this point in the adaptation, however, his narrative commentary is confined mostly to plot exposition—since there is no other incarnation of the character for him to play off, talk about, or sing about, there is little reflection left in his narrative commentary. Rather, the narrator serves a more utilitarian purpose by summarizing events that have taken place offstage, such as mentioning the death of Miss Havisham or detailing the results of Magwitch’s climactic final encounter with Compeyson on the Thames. It is a far less dynamic sort of narrative commentary than the analytical and reflective commentary provided through the musical interaction of the narrator Pip and his younger self in the
adaptation’s early scenes. What is particularly disappointing is that the narrator Pip’s relationship with the adult protagonist Pip provides perhaps the most interesting opportunity for a character duet, as the snobby, misguided, and naïve adult protagonist could be contrasted with the disappointed, practical, and knowledgeable narrator. In the novel, Dickens is able to create such a juxtaposition through the narrator’s repeated criticisms of himself, and likewise, through the sardonic tone incorporated into the narrative whenever Pip depicts himself as having acted in a particularly misguided way. A duet between Pip the narrator and Pip the snobby protagonist would provide for a fascinating depiction of Dickens’s narrative technique, and moreover, of the character’s growth, but such a duet is impossible in the Sharper/Ornadel adaptation simply because once Young Pip grows up, Adult Pip remains the only version of the character left onstage and thus alternates between the roles of protagonist and narrator. The ideal solution would be to create a musical version of the story featuring three different versions of the character: a Young Pip for the childhood scenes, an Older Pip for the adulthood scenes, and a Narrator Pip whose sole purpose is to provide commentary throughout. In this way, it would be possible to create duets sung by the two main voices of the adult Pip: the protagonist voice and the narrative voice. A song in which the snobbish and deluded protagonist’s melody was complemented by a critical and penitent air sung by the narrator would make for a three-dimensional representation of the character and elevate the musical narrative to a dramatic level that the adaptation never reaches.

While confining the latter part of Pip’s narration to plot exposition weakens the ultimate significance of the narrative, it is the solo-singing of other characters that adds a truly problematic dimension to Pip’s narrative. When other characters begin to sing solo in Great
Expectations, it becomes clear that their solo numbers are manifestations of their own personalities and not of Pip’s; for example, when Miss Havisham, sings a solo number, she is singing about what she is feeling and not what Pip thinks she is feeling. Though Pip is presented as the storyteller in the Sharper and Ornadel adaptation, the various solo numbers sung by other characters allow them to temporarily usurp the role of narrator from the lead hero. A solo number is a moment shared between a character and the audience, and ultimately, characters like Miss Havisham become far more sympathetic to the musical’s audience than they could ever be to the novel’s readers because the audience is privy to the inner workings of the characters’ minds. Though Sharper and Ornadel try to integrate the autobiographical narrative into their musical, they cannot grant Pip the same authority that he is given in the novel.

Only a few other characters in the musical sing solo besides Pip, including Miss Havisham, Joe, and Biddy. When these characters sing their solo numbers, Pip is not onstage, and his absence is analogous to the fact that in the novel, Pip can never know what exactly these characters are thinking and feeling. It does not seem to matter in the novel: the reader accepts his assessments of these other characters based on his authority as narrator. However, in the musical the audience directly learns about these characters’ inner lives through their own use of song, and the viewer can thus make his or her own assessment about them without Pip having to serve as a go-between. As Scott McMillin suggests in his text, the only narrative voice necessary is the “voice” of the orchestra, which impartially provides each character with the music necessary for his or her solo. Essentially, whenever these other characters are allowed to sing solo, they temporarily steal Pip’s narrative right out from under him. The musical becomes their story for those few minutes, even though the story
itself is not advanced by their reflections. While story time is paused, narrative time is still moving forward, and it is these individual characters, and not Pip, who advance the narrative during their solos.

Joe and Biddy’s solo songs basically serve to accentuate the likeable traits of these already likeable characters, and the effect on Pip’s narrative is thus minimal as Pip is already aware of their good qualities, even if he does not acknowledge them as often as he should. Far more interesting from a narrative standpoint is Miss Havisham’s solo, “Estella,” in which she sings of her ward and makes clear her desire to take revenge on the male sex:

   Dance my coquette
   My beautiful pet,
   Estella!
   Shimmer and whirl
   My beautiful girl,
   Estella!
   Sing for them,
   Dance for them,
   Sparkle and glitter and shine.
   Then break their hearts,
   The way the world broke mine.

The staging of the number emphasizes Miss Havisham’s cold manipulation of Estella, as the old woman imagines herself controlling the girl’s every movement. Nevertheless, it is through this solo song that Miss Havisham reveals dimensions of her own personality which remain inaccessible in the book. Pip can only tell us about his own impressions of Miss Havisham, and while we can glean hints of her inner life from her behavior, her true emotions and thoughts remain confidential. The musical incarnation of Miss Havisham, though equally manipulative and unlikable, becomes much more sympathetic simply because she is capable of revealing such thoughts and feelings to the audience. Even if we do not like her any better than her counterpart in the novel, we most certainly understand her better, and
such understanding leads to sympathy. In a musical, Pip’s singing about Miss Havisham cannot have nearly as powerful effect as Miss Havisham singing for herself. Thus, when she reveals the depths of her depression in this solo numbers, the audience is able to come away with a better understanding of who she truly is.

The side effect of Miss Havisham’s song is that Pip’s role as narrator is weakened further; since the audience is able to make its own assessment of Miss Havisham without relying on Pip, any narrative commentary on the hero’s part regarding Miss Havisham’s behavior proves superfluous. The fact that she is allowed to share such a moment with the audience underscores the contrasts between storytelling in a novel and storytelling in a musical. In the novel, it is impossible for the reader to gain access to Miss Havisham’s inner life because of the first-person narrator; in the musical, access is granted when Miss Havisham temporarily asserts herself as narrator during her solo number. The significance of Pip’s narration is diminished as a result.

This is yet another example of how the genre resists the presence of a first-person narrator. It is only natural that other characters should sing solo in the musical, for confining the singing of solo songs to a single character would prove both limiting and tedious. Nevertheless, part of the narrator’s empowerment in *Great Expectations* stems from his ability to control the representation of the other characters—as such, *Great Expectations* remains Pip’s story even though there are dozens of characters who contribute to and shape that story. The musical version of Pip does not possess the same level of power over the narrative because he is not the only character to connect directly to the audience through personal narrative.
Neither *Great Expectations* nor *Copperfield* attained even a fraction of the success of *Oliver!*, and while it is likely that a variety of factors contributed to this lack of popular acclaim, the narrative challenges presented by the subject material in both instances clearly complicated the composition of the two adaptations in terms of their ability to successfully capture the spirits of their respective sources. Though the voice of the third-person narrator in *Oliver Twist* is arguably just as vivid as either David or Pip’s voice, his narrative does not possess the same level of personalization, nor is there any sense of growth and maturation. Furthermore, this third-person omniscient voice granted Bart greater freedom in the adaptation process, as he was allowed to focus on the musicality of *all* the characters. Since the two adaptations discussed in this chapter, due in part to their lack of widespread popularity, have not proven to be definitive musical versions of the novels, the potential exists for future composers and librettists to explore the musical possibilities inherent in the narratives of these two memorable Dickensian characters.
As emphasized repeatedly throughout this project, the process of adapting Dickens for musical theater has traditionally revolved around the concept of cultural exchange. Lionel Bart had to negotiate the boundaries between a British source and an American art form, and most of the Dickensian musicals that followed Oliver! (1960) presented a similar balancing act. Bart created the precedent of using the traditions of the British music hall as a means of preserving the Englishness of Dickens, a technique that later proved essential to Rupert Holmes’s vision for Drood (1985) despite the widely different structures of the two musicals.

While Bart’s music-hall approach highlighted the Englishness of his adaptation in spite of his use of the American musical format, the rapid succession of songs in Oliver!, along with the pop idiom utilized in several of the show’s most memorable numbers, allowed Bart to experiment with certain techniques that would help to define the European approach to the modern musical in the latter decades of the twentieth century. As discussed in Section I, Bart was an important inspiration for Andrew Lloyd Webber and Cameron Mackintosh, the founding fathers of the European mega-musical movement. Oliver! thus prefigured several epic English and Anglo-French musicals such as Cats, Les Misérables, and The Phantom of the Opera—the transatlantic success of Bart’s adaptation is perhaps the ultimate indicator of its status as a forebear to these shows. Clearly, Oliver! served as an unofficial predecessor for the British invasion of Broadway that would follow in the decades after its premiere. Mackintosh ultimately brought history full circle when he oversaw the revising of the show.
in 1993 before its revival in the West End in 1994. With its enormous set, epic staging, huge production budget, and phenomenal success, the Palladium Oliver! signaled the evolution of Bart’s masterpiece from musical to mega-musical.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the mega-musical movement, though popular with audiences, was not embraced by traditionalist American theater critics who resented the British presence on Broadway in the 80s and the breakdown of the integrated book musical format—a format that was indispensable to Bart in the writing of Oliver! Whereas music had served largely decorative purposes in most of the British musicals that preceded Oliver!, music is fundamental to plot, characterization, and theme in Bart’s adaptation. Nevertheless, Bart’s early career as a songwriter, his knowledge of popular trends in music, and his initial vision for the Oliver! project all resulted in an expansion of the importance of the score: the sung word is of greater significance than the spoken word in Oliver! Moreover, the quick transitions between songs, as documented in Chapters 2 and 3, reveal one of the defining characteristics of the modern mega-musical: the music is almost incessant. In the case of many mega-musicals such as Jesus Christ: Superstar, Cats, Starlight Express, Les Miz, Phantom, and Miss Saigon, all of which make similar use of music, an epic score is necessary to match the grandeur of the story that is being told. Such grandeur seems befitting of musical adaptations of Dickens, given the length and breadth of his novels.

Curiously, the era of the mega-musical did not witness the production of many Dickensian musicals, in spite of the fact that one of the most popular mega-musicals of the period, Les Miz, was based on a romantic, panoramic, highly politicized nineteenth-century novel—the Dickensian links here are fairly obvious. Nevertheless, aside from the Broadway debut of Drood, an adaptation that does not fit the criteria for a mega-musical, the 1980s marked a
relatively stagnant point in the history of the Dickensian musical. What makes this stagnation so surprising is that the mega-musical seems the natural format for a Dickensian musical, particularly given that *Oliver!* helped to inspire this “poperetta” genre.

Furthermore, the aforementioned “balancing” of American and British elements when creating a Dickensian musical is largely inconsequential in the mega-musical context since both the source (the Dickensian novel) and the form (the mega-musical) are fundamentally British. Finally, and perhaps most obviously, the breadth, spectacle, and scale of the mega-musical seems the perfect means of conveying the epic scope of a Dickensian novel.

Naturally, the success of various Dickensian musicals which did not utilize the mega-musical technique indicates that an effective musical adaptation can be created without necessarily employing the format of the mega-musical. Indeed, while the mega-musical genre may seem particularly suited for adapting Dickens’s style of writing for the genre of musical theater, particularly in light of the perceived Englishness of this format, the traditional integrated musical format—though significantly more “American” than the mega-musical form—can likewise prove effective, perhaps superior, in the context of the composer’s goals in adapting the material. Returning to the example of *Les Miz*, the mega-musical format allowed Boublil and Schönberg to condense virtually the entire plot of Hugo’s masterpiece into their adaptation, thus preserving most of the author’s original story. Conversely, Bart eliminated almost two-thirds of the plot to *Oliver Twist* in *Oliver!*, placing more specific focus on one plot thread—Oliver’s quest for love—and the theme of camaraderie in the thieves’ den, both of which are underscored by the show’s songs. *Les Miz* lacks this strong sense of thematic unity because of its intricate plot; furthermore, the constant use of music means that the overall significance of singing is reduced. Thus, while
the mega-musical format is certainly appealing from the point of view of the plot, there are elements of Dickens’s original texts which can be preserved more readily through the format of the integrated musical, despite its inherent Americanness.

Leslie Bricusse’s *Scrooge* (1970) and Alan Menken’s *A Christmas Carol: The Musical* (1994) are especially important examples to consider in this context, as contrasting two different adaptations of the same Dickensian source, one of which employs the format of the American integrated musical and another which employs the format of the British mega-musical, allows for a clearer understanding of what these different techniques can and cannot achieve. Furthermore, the importance of cultural exchange when considering the very concept of musical adaptations of Dickens becomes even more complicated by the fact that these two variations on the *Carol* serve as virtual foils for one another: Bricusse’s adaptation employs the conventions of the American integrated musical despite the fact that Bricusse is English, while Menken’s adaptation employs the conventions of the European mega-musical despite the fact that Menken is American. Ironically, it is by utilizing the American format of the integrated musical that Bricusse is able to emphasize the Englishness of his source, for the integrated format allows him to place specific emphasis on Dickens’s characters and the traditional roots of the story. Menken’s epic mega-musical approach sacrifices some of these traditional elements, thus reducing the Englishness of the adaptation but simultaneously allowing for a more “global” appreciation of the story’s transcendent morals. The contrasts between these two shows also contribute to Paul Davis’s assessment of *A Christmas Carol* as a “culture text” that is constantly being reshaped according to our understanding of the story in popular culture. Ultimately, Chapter 8 reveals both the possibilities and limitations of these two major forms of the modern musical regarding the process of adapting Dickens.
Robert L. Patten has written that the central theme of *A Christmas Carol* is time: “The multiplicity of the story’s temporal dimensions points up its central concern, a concern that is adumbrated by its peculiar machinery, for the *Carol* is about Time: Scrooge’s conversion is effected, in multiple ways, by the agency of Time itself” (39). Given the emphasis placed on time and its passage throughout *A Christmas Carol*, it seems somehow ironic that the work has transcended time itself: the account of Ebenezer Scrooge’s redemption has become timeless. Even people who have never cracked the spine of a Dickens text know the story, for it has been told and retold in different media countless times. The number of cinematic, theatrical, and televised adaptations of *A Christmas Carol* is astonishing. In many ways, the *Carol* has actually transcended literature and become a part of our culture. How else can we account for the fact that in the last twenty-five years, pop-cultural icons such as Mickey Mouse, Kermit the Frog, and Porky Pig have all stepped into the role of Bob Cratchit?

Two extremely detailed texts have been written solely on the subject of the countless versions of Dickens’s first Christmas book: Paul Davis’s *The Lives and Times of Ebenezer Scrooge*, and Fred Guida’s *A Christmas Carol and Its Adaptations*. Both writers give comprehensive analyses of the legacy of *A Christmas Carol* in popular media, and it seems as though much that needs to be said about the various adaptations of Dickens’s novella has already been said. Nevertheless, though Guida and Davis acknowledge several musical
versions of the story in their texts, neither one explores how the conventions of the musical reshape Dickens’s novella.

Though there have been numerous musical versions of *A Christmas Carol*, two outstanding adaptations of Dickens’ s text which fall into this genre are Leslie Bricusse’s *Scrooge* (1970), and Alan Menken’s *A Christmas Carol: The Musical* (1994).¹ In some ways, the two works are reverse images of one another: Bricusse’s piece was first produced as a film but was later revised for the stage, while Menken’s adaptation went the more traditional course of starting out as a stage play and later being revised and filmed as a made-for-TV movie.² Despite this contrast, the basic breakdown of the scores is similar, and both composers show a keen awareness of where songs best fit into the narrative. The characters who sing in the Bricusse version all have analogous numbers in the Menken version.

The similar breakdowns of these two adaptations of Dickens’s novella provide a good context for reevaluating the musical qualities of Dickens’s works as well as the basic tenets of what makes for good musical theater, but one of the immediate problems created by any sort of analysis of the various adaptations of *A Christmas Carol* is the fact that no such analysis can ever be limited to an individual adaptation’s relationship to the source. The number of films, plays, and television specials based on *A Christmas Carol* has created a context for the story which extends far beyond the scope of the original novella. In *The Lives and Times of Ebenezer Scrooge*, Davis masterfully chronicles the divergent focuses of different adaptations of the *Carol* based on their historical contexts. Davis ultimately

¹ Ronald Neame directed this film, while Bricusse wrote the screenplay, score, and lyrics. For comparison purposes, the adaptation is referred to as Bricusse’s film throughout the chapter.

² In yet another reversal, Bricusse’s revisions helped to strengthen the original score, while the television adaptation of Menken’s piece is impaired by such modifications. Ultimately, the television version attempts to condense Menken’s mega-musical into a traditional book musical by adding scenes and incorporating additional dialogue into the teleplay. Given the fact that the original Menken musical revolves around musical sequences as opposed to songs, however, its suitability for the mediums of film or television is questionable.
describes *A Christmas Carol* as an amorphous “culture text” as opposed to a written text that is set in stone: “Rather than beginning as an oral story that was later written down, the *Carol* was written to be retold. Dickens was its creator, but it is also the product of its re-creators who have retold, adapted, and revised it over the years” (*Lives* 3). Certain elements of the original story have been forgotten, while other elements are now firmly ingrained within our culture; we would find any adaptation of *A Christmas Carol* incomplete if it lacked these components. As Davis points out, “we remember the Carol as a cluster of phrases, images, and ideas. The images of Tim riding on Bob Cratchit’s shoulder or of Scrooge huddled behind his desk while Bob shivers on his high stool are etched on our consciousness; ‘Bah! Humbug!’ and ‘God bless us, every one!’ echo in our minds” (*Lives* 3). Though Dickens’s story was completed in 1843, the culture text of *A Christmas Carol* is still being written today.

Various iconic adaptations, most notably the 1951 cinematic version starring Alastair Sim as Scrooge (regarded by most critics as perhaps the greatest rendering of Dickens’s novella), have played a significant part in the writing of this culture text. These truly memorable adaptations of the novella have helped to shape our modern understanding of the story, and the values of the filmmakers, usually reflective of the decades in which their film versions were produced, make Davis’s argument about a culture text all the more intriguing. Consequently, the Bricusse and Menken adaptations must be assessed in terms of their contribution to the larger body of work surrounding our perception of the narrative.

To place both of these adaptations in the context of the larger culture text, one must immediately note several key differences between the approaches taken by the two writers. Bricusse’s adaptation is written in the form of a traditional American book musical, the form
made famous by Rodgers and Hammerstein, Lerner and Loewe, Frank Loesser, and the other writers of the golden age in American musical theater—this despite the fact that Bricusse is British. Conversely, Menken’s adaptation is written in the form of a mega-musical, the form made famous by European composers such as Andrew Lloyd Webber, Claude-Michel Schönberg, and Alain Boublil—this despite the fact that Menken is American. The scale of Menken’s musical is immediately evocative of Lloyd Webber despite the composers’ different backgrounds. Furthermore, many of the criticisms leveled against Menken’s adaptation by theater critics are reminiscent of the traditional complaints that American reviewers have made against European mega-musicals.3 Ironically, though Bricusse comes from the same cultural background as Lloyd Webber, his musical is far more American than Menken’s in terms of its structure and format. Whereas Bricusse’s adaptation focuses on the integration of songs to help tell the story, Menken’s adaptation is composed of a series of longer musical sequences that feature a great deal of singing and practically no spoken dialogue; this “poperetta” style is characteristic of the mega-musical.

These divergences in the approaches taken by the composers contribute to Davis’s assertion that *A Christmas Carol* is a constantly unfolding culture text. In his book, Davis

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3 Reviews of Menken’s *A Christmas Carol* were mixed. Michael Kuchwara sardonically comments that “‘A Christmas Carol’ is a series of special effects in search of a musical” and notes that “there’s something wrong when the show’s high-powered technical expertise overshadows the story” (par. 5). He later comments on how other mega-musicals are similarly dominated by stage effects like a helicopter landing on stage (as in *Miss Saigon*) or a chandelier crashing (as in *The Phantom of the Opera*), all of which may be visually awing, but which simultaneously serve to distract from such elements as characterization or music. Jeremy Gerard similarly comments on how the staging eclipses both the music and the story being presented: “The score is overwhelmed by the gimmickry, and that’s a shame, because Menken has no equal in writing accessible tunes, and Ahrens is an intelligent, sentimental writer perfectly suited to the assignment. So you’ll have to wait for the cast album to get a true sense of the songs. And while Ockrent and Ahrens’s book is faithful to the original, it’s so subordinated to the special effects as to be all but impossible to follow, especially for youngsters” (pars. 12-14). David Richards of the *New York Times* notes that the Dickensian narrative, and the story of Scrooge’s redemption, often seem to disappear amidst the splendor of the scenery and staging: “The individual scenes, however, have little weight. Although Walter Charles, who portrays Scrooge, is onstage constantly, you can forget for long patches that ‘A Christmas Carol’ is about his conversion to goodness (C13). All of these criticisms are fairly typical of musicals written in the mega-musical format.
outlines the diverse approaches taken to the Carol by American and British filmmakers during different decades of the twentieth century. The two musicals are also the products of different cultural values, and likewise, different movements in musical theater: Scrooge was produced before the mega-musical emerged, while A Christmas Carol was produced in the wake of some of the most successful Broadway mega-musicals. An analysis of the similarities and differences between these two adaptations highlights some of the divergences between American and British cultural emphases regarding the Carol, along with the dissimilar formats of the traditional American musical and the European mega-musical. Ultimately, Bricusse’s integrated approach allows for a greater appreciation of the musicality of the characters and situations presented in the original story, for by incorporating songs only at distinctive points in the story, Bricusse is able to celebrate the various emotional climaxes in the novella. Ironically, the American format of the integrated musical is better suited for highlighting the traditional Englishness of the story. Since music is used almost continuously in Menken’s adaptation, there is less emphasis on the story’s climaxes. Furthermore, the memorable traits of the Dickensian characters are sometimes lost against the larger background of the massive chorus numbers. Even so, Menken’s mega-musical technique allows for a more global appreciation of Dickens’s novella, as the scale of the adaptation reinforces the story’s all-encompassing and transcendent thematic appeal. Thus, the mega-musical approach fits in better with Menken’s American background.

Before proceeding, it is important to reiterate that Scrooge is a film while Menken’s Carol is a play. Some critics might argue that the different media of the two adaptations warrants closer scrutiny than the divergent traditions exemplified by the composers. Nevertheless, the grand staging and enormous budget of Menken’s adaptation actually give the show an almost
cinematic splendor. Thus, the differences between the two media are negligible.

Furthermore, despite the traditional approach used by Bricusse and the mega-musical approach utilized by Menken, the musical breakdowns are similar (see Table 8.1).

**Table 8.1 Musical Breakdowns of *Scrooge* and *A Christmas Carol: The Musical***

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Episode</th>
<th>Leslie Bricusse’s <em>Scrooge</em></th>
<th>Alan Menken’s <em>A Christmas Carol</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prologue</td>
<td>“Sing a Christmas Carol”</td>
<td>“The Years Are Passing By”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scrooge’s Isolation</td>
<td>“I Hate People”/“Father Christmas”</td>
<td>“Jolly, Rich, and Fat”/“Nothing To Do With Me”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marley’s Arrival</td>
<td>“See the Phantoms”</td>
<td>“Link by Link”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fezziwig Party</td>
<td>“December the 25th”</td>
<td>“Mr. Fezziwig’s Annual Christmas Ball”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scrooge’s Engagement</td>
<td>“Happiness”</td>
<td>“There’s A Place Called Home”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scrooge’s Lost Love</td>
<td>“You…You”</td>
<td>“Money Montage”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X-Mas Present</td>
<td>“I Like Life”</td>
<td>“Abundance and Charity”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cratchit Family Christmas</td>
<td>“The Beautiful Day”</td>
<td>“Christmas Together”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X-Mas Future</td>
<td>“Thank You Very Much”</td>
<td>“Dancing on Your Grave”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redemption</td>
<td>“I’ll Begin Again”</td>
<td>“Yesterday, Tomorrow and Today”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finale</td>
<td>“Thank You Very Much” (reprise)</td>
<td>“Christmas Together” (reprise)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The fundamental difference between the outlines of the two musicals is that since there is very little dialogue in the Menken adaptation, most of the “numbers” are presented as parts of extended musical montages which encapsulate entire sequences of the novella. While there are still distinct songs which can be lifted from these montages and evaluated as individual melodies like the songs in the Bricusse adaptation, they are almost always part of a larger medley. Some of the major differences between the Bricusse and Menken adaptations thus relate to the different musical theater conventions utilized by the composers; as mentioned, Bricusse writes in the American format of the book show, while Menken utilizes the conventions of the European mega-musical. These different forms dictate the larger differences in the scores.
Both *Scrooge* and *A Christmas Carol* begin in the same way that Dickens opens up his novella: an introduction to the embittered and miserly Ebenezer Scrooge, which proceeds into an immediate contrast between the old skinflint and the novella’s goodhearted characters such as Bob Cratchit, Fred, and the charity collectors. The Bricusse film starts almost identically to the original story, with Scrooge bullying Cratchit and rejecting his nephew’s invitation to Christmas dinner.\(^4\) The scene culminates with Bob leaving the office to spend time with his two youngest children. It is actually Cratchit who sings the first full-scale number in the film, “Christmas Children,” as he takes Tiny Tim and daughter Kathy shopping to procure the elements of the family’s meager Christmas dinner. This gentle and charming song sets the kinship of the Cratchit family in contrast to Scrooge’s isolated misery, as epitomized in Scrooge’s subsequent solo number: “I Hate People.” The parallels in the staging of these two numbers effectively highlight these contrasts: whereas the Cratchits journey about London enjoying the pleasures of the season, Scrooge tours the city to collect debts from those who owe him money. The paths they follow are virtually identical, yet simultaneously, widely contradictory.

As the title to his song indicates, Bricusse’s Scrooge is more violent and overt in his contempt for humanity than his literary counterpart. As opposed to passively trying to “edge his way along the crowded paths of life, warning all human sympathy to keep its distance” (10), Bricusse’s Scrooge actively makes life difficult for all of the people who owe him money. The opening lyrics convey this more energetic abhorrence:  “Scavengers and sycophants and flatterers and fools/Pharisees and parasites and hypocrites and ghouls!/Calculating swindlers! Prevaricating frauds!/Perpetrating goodness as they roam the earth in hordes!” Whereas Bob is polite to the various merchants he visits, Scrooge is harsh

\(^4\) Fred is inexplicably renamed Harry in the film adaptation.
toward his debtors and seems to enjoy bullying them, as it gives him a sense of both power and self-satisfaction: “Fools who have no money spend it/Get in debt, then try to end it!/Beg me on their knees befriend them/Knowing I have cash to lend them/Soft-hearted me! Hard-working me/Clean living, thrifty and kind as can be.” Along with the more energetic unkindness he displays, Bricusse’s Scrooge constantly exhibits an almost Pecksniffian level of sanctimonious hypocrisy. Thus, Scrooge’s journeying around London collecting money from people and spreading misery is especially memorable when it is set in contrast to Bob’s journeying around London spending money and spreading cheer. These two very different songs sung by the two characters in the opening scenes highlight their disparate personalities. The disparities between the characters as presented in Dickens’s novella are consequently accentuated through music.

The opening scenes to this film, along with the use of songs, clearly reflect the traditional conventions of the integrated American book show. The songs that follow the scene in Scrooge’s counting house are used for story and characterization purposes, and both numbers seem to emerge naturally from the context. Bob begins singing “Christmas Children” upon reuniting with his kids because the joy of spending Christmas Eve with them is too great to be encapsulated in spoken dialogue, much as Scrooge begins singing “I Hate People” after his encounter with the charity collectors. His angry declaration that the poor should die to “decrease the surplus population” (14) is the perfect lead-in to his first number, as Scrooge’s bile has built to a level where song is the only means of fittingly expressing his contempt. The songs highlight the dominant qualities of the characters.

Whereas Bricusse’s version opens in Scrooge’s counting house and focuses on just a few characters, the opening to Menken’s musical is grandiose in comparison. The first scene is
staged in the Royal Exchange, and rather than simply focusing on Scrooge, Cratchit, and Fred, Menken incorporates an enormous chorus of London businessmen and their wives, all of whom rejoice in the fact that they are “Jolly, Rich, and Fat.” While the massive sets meant to represent London’s center of commerce embody the sense of physical grandeur that is so essential to most mega-musicals, Menken’s scoring is similarly large-scale in that the Dickensian characters are introduced against the background of a large chorus of supporting players, all of whom contribute to the idea that the world of this musical is three-dimensional; there is constant activity (and almost constant singing) even if the lead characters are not the ones engaged in it.

In traditional mega-musical fashion, there is little or no dialogue, nor any real transitions between the numbers. Rather, “Jolly, Rich, and Fat,” simply evolves into an even grander number: “Nothing to do with Me.” Menken adeptly incorporates Scrooge’s confrontations with Cratchit, his nephew, and the charity collectors into a single sequence, and the scale of the number continues to grow as Scrooge takes to the street and encounters various Londoners engaged in the joys of the Christmas season. Throughout the big musical sequences such as this one, Menken consistently recycles different melodies, setting new lyrics to repeated motifs that are associated with certain characters or groups of characters. This method of recycling is another hallmark of the mega-musical, as definitive mega-musicals such as *Phantom* and *Les Miz* frequently make use of refrains and musical motifs. In this opening sequence, Bob and Fred sing to the same melodies while trying to get through to Scrooge; they are summarily dismissed by the miser, who sings to the same tune in both instances:

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5 This technique has frequently been a source of criticism for mega-musicals, particularly when the repetitions are used haphazardly. Menken is meticulous with his reprises however, and the use and reuse of music throughout this sequence, and indeed, throughout the entire musical, is highly organized.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CRATCHIT</th>
<th>FRED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Scrooge, I’m sorry</td>
<td>Come to Christmas dinner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>But sir, might I go?</td>
<td>We’re inviting you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Might you pay me early,</td>
<td>Be with family, uncle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just this once?</td>
<td>Just this once!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Tiny Tim is ill, sir</td>
<td>You’d enjoy it, uncle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youngest son, you know</td>
<td>We’d enjoy it too</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife and children need me</td>
<td>You’d meet Sally, uncle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just this once!</td>
<td>Just this once!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SCROOGE</strong></td>
<td><strong>SCROOGE</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People wanting this,</td>
<td>People taking wives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People wanting that</td>
<td>Living little lives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spreading bloody cheer</td>
<td>Cozier than mice!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plucking at your sleeve</td>
<td>Marrying for love,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holding out their hat</td>
<td>Push will come to shove,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singing in your ear</td>
<td>You’ll be thinking twice!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking off the day</td>
<td>Asking me to dine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asking for their pay</td>
<td>Breaking open wine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Only once a year”</td>
<td>Taking no advice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well you can take Christmas</td>
<td>Well you can have Christmas,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And stuff it with bread!</td>
<td>And marriage as well,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And if that isn’t perfectly clear:</td>
<td>And to hell with your trees and your rice!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do not need to know</td>
<td>I will not fill my plate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of your family or your woe</td>
<td>Socialize or celebrate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I suggest Tiny Tim drink tea</td>
<td>With a fool and his family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give him tea, give him stew,</td>
<td>Let your love see you through</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It has nothing to do with me!</td>
<td>But have nothing to do with me!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(8-9)</em></td>
<td><em>(9-10)</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The same trick is used when Scrooge encounters three solicitors on his way home: a lamplighter who asks his assistance, a sandwich board man selling tickets to a show, and a blind beggar woman. Each character sings to the same melody when requesting Scrooge’s help and is summarily rebuffed by the miser. Later, each of these characters will step into a new role: the Ghost of Christmas Past, Christmas Present, and Christmas Yet to Come, respectively.
The almost operatic quality of Menken’s adaptation, along with the use of an enormous chorus throughout, places this version squarely in the tradition of the mega-musical. While Bricusse’s Scrooge also wanders about London during his first number, he is the only one who is singing. The benefit of the more traditional approach used by Bricusse is that the integrated format allows for the focus of the adaptation to remain squarely on Scrooge himself, while the grandeur of the Menken mega-musical adaptation sometimes distracts from the Dickensian narrative being presented. Since virtually everything is sung, there are never any clear transitions between spoken and sung words; thus, the overall power of music in the context of the story is somewhat diminished. The breakdown of the Bricusse musical is comparable to a line graph, as the scenes build toward a climax of some sort before peaking with the singing of a musical number. The Menken musical utilizes a more concentric pattern, as numbers are introduced without the aid of dialogue and gradually expand, encompassing a greater number of characters, melodies, and situations (see Figures 8.1 and 8.2).

The contrasts between the genres of the two musicals are evident throughout the sequences that follow. The memorable appearance of Jacob Marley carrying the chain he “forged in life” (22) seems to necessitate the incorporation of music so as to highlight the dramatic tension of Marley’s warnings. In the Bricusse film, Marley’s song is presented more like a poem recited over the moaning of the various phantoms that have filled the sky, thus accentuating the terrors of the scene by its very subtlety. Furthermore, the song emerges naturally from the dialogue that precedes it, and the dialogue that follows provides closure to the scene as a whole. In the Menken adaptation, Marley’s introduction again reflects the

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6 While Scrooge’s number gradually transitions to the comical “Farver Christmas,” in which several boisterous street urchins mock the miser, the songs are not layered one on top of the other as in the Menken adaptation.
tenets of the mega-musical, as the scale of the scene is breathtaking—just before Marley appears, the entire front of Scrooge’s house contorts into an enormous representation of the ghost’s face. This serves as the lead-in to Marley’s song, “Link by Link,” in which Marley and many other specters assemble to warn Scrooge of the fate that awaits him. Once again, Menken takes a small-scale scene and converts it into a truly impressive musical sequence, as ghosts fill the stage and hover about Scrooge, suspended by their chains like marionettes on
strings. The intimacy between the audience and the characters, along with the overall poignancy of the story itself, is partially sacrificed for the sake of spectacle.

Similar contrasts are discernible throughout the adaptations. While both composers employ songs in the Fezziwig Christmas Party scene, Bricusse’s “December the 25th” is sung to the tune of a fiddle rather than to the orchestrations of a full ensemble, and the Fezziwigs remain the center of attention throughout. The parallel number in Menken’s adaptation, “Mr. Fezziwig’s Annual Christmas Ball,” is much more boisterous and unreserved. When the Ghost of Christmas Present is introduced shortly thereafter, Bricusse keeps the song between Scrooge and the spirit as a simple duet, a duet that emerges naturally from the situation presented in the scene; the composer uses dialogue to set up the scene between Scrooge and the Ghost before proceeding into the “I Like Life” number, which is the culmination of the conversation between the two characters. Meanwhile, Menken incorporates a chorus of tap-dancing showgirls to supplement Christmas Present’s message of cheer and celebration in his parallel number, “Abundance and Charity.”7 The Ghost himself seems somewhat less prominent as a result. Finally, there is the Cratchit family Christmas, another quintessentially musical moment in story. In the novella, Dickens explicitly references a song sung by Tiny Tim following the Cratchits’ dinner: “All this time the chestnuts and the jug went round and round; and by-and-bye they had a song, about a lost child travelling in the snow, from Tiny Tim, who had a plaintive little voice, and sang it very well indeed” (53). While it is certainly not necessary to preserve this occurrence in adaptations of the novella, incorporating a number into the Cratchit scene in these two versions helps to heighten the sentiment of the scene, particularly if it is sung by or centered on Tiny Tim. Such a song can help to

7 Bricusse expands the scale of this number for the stage. In the theatrical version of Scrooge, “I Like Life” is transformed into a larger choral number featuring a re-creation of certain scenes from Tchaikovsky’s Nutcracker. Since the number is used to close the first act, a more large-scale finale is necessary.
accentuate Scrooge’s identification with Cratchit’s youngest child while simultaneously strengthening the audience’s sympathy for the family. Though Bricusse keeps Tiny Tim’s song, “The Beautiful Day,” a small-scale solo that highlights the relationship between the child and his family, Menken uses the Cratchit family Christmas as a quick introduction to yet another large-scale musical sequence which chronicles the celebration of Christmas all over London and which features a huge chorus made up of drunks, charity collectors, pantomime performers, sailors, and finally, Fred and his family. While this grand scope allows for a panoramic portrayal of Menken’s vision of Dickensian London, the overall importance of Dickens’s characters is reduced, as they are just one part of a much larger sequence.

Perhaps the most musical moment in A Christmas Carol is Scrooge’s redemption, for the sheer emotional power behind the miser’s transformation necessitates that he sing about the change in him in a musical adaptation of the story. Both Bricusse’s “I’ll Begin Again” and Menken’s “Yesterday, Tomorrow and Today” effectively highlight Scrooge’s salvation, and both numbers are used to prefigure the larger production numbers which focus on Scrooge’s celebration of Christmas. The final scene in the Bricusse film, which features Scrooge enjoying Christmas with his family and new friends, is the one moment in his adaptation when the composer seems to transition from book musical to mega-musical, as the entire scene is made up of several extended reprises of virtually all the songs that have already been sung. The epic scale of this sequence, which features countless extras and members of the chorus, is certainly analogous to the final number in Menken’s adaptation, which presents a similarly large-scale celebration of Scrooge’s Christmas redemption and which likewise utilizes numerous reprises. The benefits of Bricusse’s more traditional approach to the score
throughout his adaptation are apparent in this final scene, however, as one gets the sense that everything has been building up to this final mega-musical sequence; although the Menken sequence is equally rousing, almost every other major musical sequence in the adaptation has featured the same level of grandeur, and likewise, utilized the mega-musical repetition technique. Thus, the finale to the Menken version (and Scrooge’s redemption itself) lacks the climactic tenor of the finale to the Bricusse film.

To label one of these musicals as more successful than the other based on the format employed by the composers is a matter of personal taste, though the approach that one takes to Dickens’s story can shape his or her impressions of which version more successfully captures the essence of the novella. The integrated approach employed by Bricusse presents a more traditional and almost commemorative treatment of the source material. By incorporating musical numbers at distinct points in the story, and focusing on the musicality of the individual Dickensian characters, Bricusse celebrates the most memorable aspects of the novella itself. The larger scale treatment by Menken is a macro celebration of the joys of the Christmas season as they are presented through Dickens’s text. Menken undoubtedly succeeds in capturing the grandeur and excitement of the Christmas season, but his adaptation focuses more on the appeal of the subject matter as opposed to the appeal of the story itself.

The genres utilized by the two composers prove particularly appropriate when one reflects on their divergent cultural backgrounds: Bricusse, the British writer, was born into the cultural tradition responsible for producing the source material itself. It is thus fitting that he employ an integrated, American-style approach, as this format, with its emphasis on musical highpoints and character-driven songs, is most conducive to his celebrating the traditional
British cultural appeal of moments within the novella itself. Whereas Lionel Bart preserved the Englishness of Dickens in Oliver! by focusing on the tradition of the music hall, Bricusse utilizes the integrated musical format to preserve the Englishness of Dickens by focusing on the tradition of A Christmas Carol itself, which, like Dickens, has become a British cultural institution. The European mega-musical format employed by Menken, with its enormous scale and emphasis on spectacle, allows the American composer to stress the broader thematic appeal of Dickens’s novella; songs like “Abundance and Charity,” and “Christmas Together” do not place significant emphasis on Dickens’s characters, the central story, or England, but they lay great stress on the joys of the Christmas season as expressed in the original text. Though A Christmas Carol is inherently British and was intended for a Victorian audience, these joys extend far beyond the national and cultural traditions of the country in which the novella was written. While Bricusse’s more subtle technique allows for greater emphasis on the story itself and the traditions behind it, Menken’s larger-than-life approach lays stress on the transcendent joys of the season. Paradoxically, it is by taking an American-style approach to the musical that Bricusse is able to stress the Englishness of the source. Conversely, it is by taking a European-style approach that Menken is able to stress the broader thematic appeal of the story.

Evaluating several of the analogous numbers in the two musicals highlights these contrasts. As mentioned, Bricusse’s “December the 25th” is a much more subtle number than Menken’s Fezziwig song, “Mr. Fezziwig’s Annual Christmas Ball.” By limiting the orchestration to the fiddler seated on the tall desk, Bricusse preserves a classic image from Dickens’s original novella. He also preserves the feel of an English country dance: the fiddler enters the scene playing several traditional English carols, including “I Saw Three
Ships,” and “Here We Come A-Wassailing.” The Englishness of the scene is a celebration of the Englishness of Dickens’s original text. Furthermore, the subtlety of the “December the 25th” number permits Mr. Fezziwig and his wife to remain the central focus of the scene; the music is restrained enough to allow the Dickensian elements, as embodied by the characters, to take center stage.

Menken’s song comes across as a large-scale Broadway number as opposed to a traditional English dance. Whereas Bricusse, the British composer, preserves a sense of rustic English tradition, Menken, the American composer, writes in the style of a lavish Broadway show. Though Mr. Fezziwig and his wife are still the lead singers in this number, the large scale of the song and the seemingly endless quantity of party guests who are named and catalogued in the lyrics, distracts from the personalities of the lead singers. Despite the song’s title, it seems as though this might be anyone’s annual Christmas ball, as the energy, good cheer, and excitement of the season is more important than the individual Dickensian characters and their place in the story. As in most mega-musicals, the personalities of the characters are sometimes lost against the larger background of the “poperetta” score and spectacular scenery.

An even more illustrative example of these contrasts can be found by comparing the Ghost of Christmas Present scenes. Bricusse’s “I Like Life” duet allows for a better appreciation of the relationship between the two characters. Furthermore, the dialogue between Scrooge and the Ghost, while not taken word-for-word from the novella, allows for a natural buildup toward the number as the Ghost sardonically ridicules Scrooge before trying to get him to

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8 The country atmosphere that Bricusse creates in his number is in keeping with the tone of Dickens’s text despite the fact that the Fezziwig warehouse is obviously in London. Fezziwig is an urban businessman, but Dickens instills the character with the patriarchal qualities embodied by a country lord, who would hold such Christmas parties for his tenants at his manor. See Davis’s Lives and Times of Ebenezer Scrooge pg. 32-40.
change his worldview through the introduction of a new philosophy in “I Like Life.” Once again, the sequence is structured around a classic image from the novella, and the visual layout of the scene corresponds perfectly to Leech’s original illustration. Thus, the Bricusse adaptation stresses the classic appeal of the characters and the story, and the songs are integrated to supplement this appeal. The subsequent numbers in this scene also emphasize Bricusse’s cultural approach: the staging of Tim’s carol is analogous to the way it is described in the original novella and reflects the tradition of the sentimental ballad, while “The Minister’s Cat” is blocked like a Victorian parlor game, which further accentuates the Englishness of the adaptation. Bricusse keeps every element of the musical, including the music, integrated in the tradition of the novella and the cultural values that it represents.

“Abundance and Charity,” Menken’s Ghost of Christmas Present number, is another example of the different viewpoint taken by the composer and how that viewpoint is supplemented by the mega-musical approach. As in “I Like Life,” the Ghost of Christmas Present celebrates the joys of the Christmas season with Scrooge, but the interactions between the two characters seem less important than the lively spectacle being presented on stage, a spectacle that comes complete with a group of tap-dancing chorus girls in festive outfits. Here it is important to note that Menken’s A Christmas Carol, while clearly a mega-musical, is also a product of yet another musical genre: the New York Christmas show. A Christmas Carol, which was staged at Madison Square Garden’s Paramount Theater from 1994 through 2003, emerged from the tradition of the Radio City Christmas Spectacular. Like the annual Radio City show, A Christmas Carol was revived at Christmastime in New York for several years in a row, and Menken’s inclusion of chorus girls in his Ghost of Christmas Present sequence is clearly in homage to the Radio City Rockettes. More than
this, the structure and spectacle of numbers like “Abundance and Charity” signifies that Menken’s adaptation is meant to recreate a boisterous celebration of Christmas that is more evocative of New York and Broadway as opposed to a specifically Dickensian vision evocative of London and Britain. Many of the sequences in the Menken adaptation could easily be incorporated into the Radio City show, as the emphasis on music and spectacle, as opposed to story and character, would fit in with the revue show format employed in the Christmas Spectacular. Whereas Bricusse’s book-musical approach allows him to place the Dickensian narrative at the forefront, and simultaneously, to accentuate the traditions associated with the novella and the British celebration of Christmas, the mega-musical format works for Menken because it allows him to emphasize pop music and visual splendor as the primary elements of the adaptation. While the story of the Carol is still told faithfully, the telling of that story is subsidiary to the celebration of Christmas.

Other more subtle divergences in the cultural approaches taken by the two composers can be discovered by examining their treatments of the lead character. In his text, Davis notes that the most significant element of the modern culture text of A Christmas Carol is the desire to try and understand the protagonist. The original incarnation of Scrooge is given limited depth by his creator. Dickens drops hints that Scrooge had a bad relationship with his father, but there are no scenes depicting the young Ebenezer’s family life. The reader is also left unaware of where or when Scrooge met Belle and how their relationship progressed up to the point of their separation. Rather than leave such matters to the imagination of viewers, however, the goal of many adaptors of Dickens’s novella since the mid-twentieth century has been to try and explain Scrooge’s behavior. These attempts have resulted in significant

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9 Belle is renamed “Isabel” in the Bricusse adaptation and “Emily” in the Menken adaptation. As in many other post-1950s adaptations of the novella, she is introduced in the Fezziwig scene as a guest at the Christmas party.
emphasis being placed on the Christmas Past sequence. Davis notes that Victorian readers of
the Carol focused mostly on the episodes involving the second of the three Christmas spirits:
“Victorian reviewers, who devoted much of their reviews to retelling the story and quoting
long passages from the text, had little to say about Christmas Past. The only passage from
Stave 2 that found its way into the review was the account of the Fezziwigs’ party.
Scrooge’s unhappy childhood and lonely schooldays were almost completely ignored” (Lives
41). If the Victorians were more interested in the contemporary depiction of Christmas as
presented in Stave 3, modern adaptors prefer to focus on Stave 2 in hopes of providing the
viewer with a clearer sense of Scrooge, the man.

The 1951 film adaptation of A Christmas Carol (which was originally entitled Scrooge
upon its release in Britain) is often regarded as the quintessential version of Dickens’s text.
Part of the film’s success is undoubtedly attributable to Alastair Sim’s masterful
performance. Whereas earlier film and stage versions of the novella featured actors depicting
Scrooge as a one-dimensional curmudgeon, Sim portrays a deeply embittered and lonely man
who is more discouraged than malicious. The actor is given excellent material to work with,
as Noel Langley’s script helps to raise the audience’s understanding of Dickens’s character to
fascinating new levels. Davis labels this particular adaptation as the “best example of the
psychological Carol” (Lives 189), and Guida agrees that “this Carol, like none before it,
seeks to explain Ebenezer Scrooge” (104). In order to accomplish this feat, the filmmakers
expand the Christmas Past segment.

In the 1951 film, numerous creative liberties are taken with Stave 2. As Guida points out,
“the sequence with the Ghost of Christmas Past is in fact the longest in the film” (104). In
this adaptation, the viewer is made privy to the young Scrooge’s descent toward the
emotional paralysis and isolation that define his later life. Mr. Fezziwig’s role is expanded, as the film depicts the kindhearted businessman as part of a dying breed of small traders being driven out of business by industrialization. When the young Ebenezer realizes that he can make more money working for the corrupt manufacturer Mr. Jorkin, he leaves Fezziwig’s employment and soon meets Jacob Marley. Marley and Jorkin both play a role in altering the younger Scrooge’s innocent vision of the world, prompting him to focus on material gain and progress as opposed to love and fidelity. Later, Scrooge and Marley are shown engaging in the same questionable business practices as their mentor.

Scrooge’s sister Fan is given a slightly larger role in the film as well. Instead of being presented as Scrooge’s younger sister, she is depicted as the eldest sibling and thus plays a maternal role to the younger Ebenezer. Though the original text mentions Fan’s dying young, the circumstances surrounding her passing are not revealed. In the film, however, Fan dies after giving birth to Fred. This tragedy is established as the central cause of Scrooge’s contempt for his nephew, as he blames Fred for Fan’s death. Langley takes the matter even further, however, by revealing that Scrooge’s own mother died while giving birth to him. Thus, the neglectful treatment of Ebenezer by his own father, merely alluded to in Dickens’s novella, is explained.

Guida praises the numerous creative liberties taken in the Sim version of A Christmas Carol, claiming that “this approach – this filling in the blanks in Scrooge’s past – provides us with a very complex and richly textured Scrooge who contrasts sharply with the kind of cardboard villain found in many lesser versions” (106). Davis also admires the adaptation, though he is more interested in its psychological approach as part of a trend in the cultural understanding of the Carol from the 1950s onward. Though Davis later discusses Bricusse’s
Scrooge in the context of the 60s and 70s, it is worth noting how this musical, along with Menken’s adaptation, engages its 1951 predecessor. Like Langley, Bricusse and Menken seek to explain Scrooge’s behavior, and like Langley, they do so by adding on to the Ghost of Christmas Past sequence. However, rather than relying solely on dialogue and supplementary scenes, the two composers also utilize music and song for their purposes. Several divergences in their approaches to the depiction of Scrooge’s past reinforce the cultural differences of the two composers as well as the dissimilar techniques dictated by the genres in which they are writing.

Bricusse does not take as many creative liberties as Langley or Menken in his depiction of Scrooge’s past, though he does include some scenes (and songs) that help to further develop the character. The first images from Scrooge’s past are of several horse-drawn carts carrying various children away from their school. The children are dressed up as characters from an English pantomime (another indication of Bricusse’s very traditional approach to the material). As they ride about in the carts, the youngsters sing “Sing A Christmas Carol,” the film’s main theme—meanwhile, the young Scrooge sullenly watches from the empty schoolhouse. The older Ebenezer mutters, “I could never join in those Christmas parties,” and though the audience does not learn the reasons why, the Ghost of Christmas Past makes reference to the young Scrooge as having been “neglected by his family.” Curiously, Fan is shown amongst the other children in the carriages, which means that if Mr. Scrooge has denied his son permission to attend the local Christmas parties he has not been so cruel toward his daughter, who clearly delights in the carefree joys and lighthearted musicality of the season. Bricusse’s emphasis on carol singing and pantomimes in the opening to the Christmas Past sequence reinforces the idea that the young Scrooge has been excluded from
the traditional joys of the celebration of Christmas. This exclusion highlights the sense of loneliness that has contributed to the elder Scrooge’s cruelty, and the use of music here is especially worthy of note.

Bricusse utilizes music similarly in the Fezziwig Christmas party scene, as Scrooge is the only one of the younger employees not to participate in the “December the 25th” number, despite repeated attempts by Isabel to bring him into the song. Ebenezer stands on the periphery throughout the entire number, and thus does not partake in yet another musical Christmas tradition: the country dance. When the Ghost of Christmas Past inquires as to why he did not participate, the older Scrooge defensively replies: “Because I couldn’t do it.” Just a few moments later, however, Scrooge’s younger self agrees to waltz with Isabel and proves himself to be quite proficient at dancing after all. This curious contradiction raises even more interesting questions about Scrooge’s isolation and to what extent it might have been self-imposed, even in his childhood. Shy, lonely, and frustrated, it is not difficult to imagine the young Scrooge purposefully withdrawing into the background. Conversely, Isabel is depicted as constantly trying to draw him forward. Throughout both “December the 25th” and its immediate successor, “Happiness,” she is persistently shown leading him by the hand no matter what the activity. Tellingly, Scrooge does not sing in either of these numbers; rather, he simply listens.

“Happiness,” presented in the form of a montage, is employed to show the development of Scrooge’s relationship with Isabel. Rather than simply limiting the two characters to one setting or activity, the song depicts them enjoying various hobbies together including carriage rides, picnics, archery games, and excursions on the Thames. The diverse number of settings corresponds well to the lyrics of the song, as the montage allows for an emphasis on
changeability and movement. The various metaphors used to describe happiness are underscored by the varying activities pursued by Scrooge and his fiancée: “Happiness is a high hill/Will I find it? Yes I will/Happiness is a tall tree/Can I climb it? Watch and see/…Happiness is a bright star/Are we happy? Yes we are/Happiness is a clear sky/Give me wings and let me fly/For happiness is whatever you want it to be.” Furthermore, all of the activities featured in the sequence are rural activities, and the bright countryside scenes that make up Scrooge’s youth are set in contrast to the darker, more urban scenes utilized in the sequences depicting his later life. These contrasts between rural and urban values are true to several of the themes presented in Dickens’s novella, as well as the cultural tradition in which Dickens was writing; Malcolm Andrews notes that from *Pickwick Papers* onward, Dickens was certain to emphasize “fondness for the fading, softly-focused Pickwickian idyll” (*English* xviii) as represented in the rural tranquility of Dingley Dell and Manor Farm. The idyll fades quickly for Scrooge, and his inability to sing with Isabel during this number foreshadows his rejection of her simple joys and country values.

The mournful ballad that Scrooge sings following his separation from Isabel, “You…You,” highlights his inability to make sense of his actions, as he can only reflect on what Isabel once meant to him—he never reaches a conclusion about why he allowed her to slip away: “You—you were new to me/You—you were spring/You—you were true to me./You—you were everything./You—you were good for me/You were my day/Did all you could for me/I let you go away.” It is a telling moment when Scrooge sings this solo song, for one is reminded of the fact that he chose not to sing with Isabel during either “December the 25th” or “Happiness.” Rather than use music to celebrate as Isabel does, he instead turns to it for mourning purposes after he has lost the woman he loved. One is left with the
impression that if the younger Scrooge had been able to rejoice in song and music like Isabel and Fan, he would never have lost sight of the important things in his life; this impression is evocative of a moment in Dickens’s text where Scrooge listens to Fred’s wife play music:

Scrooge’s niece played well upon the harp; and played among other tunes a simple little air (a mere nothing: you might learn to whistle it in two minutes), which had been familiar to the child who fetched Scrooge from the boarding-school, as he had been reminded by the Ghost of Christmas Past. When this strain of music sounded, all the things that Ghost had shown him, came upon his mind; he softened more and more; and thought that if he could have listened to it often, years ago, he might have cultivated the kindnesses of life for his own happiness with his own hands, without resorting to the sexton’s spade that buried Jacob Marley. (58)

The fact that the young Scrooge is constantly excluded from participation in music (whether by the decree of others or by his own choice) emphasizes his larger isolation from humanity. This isolation hastens his development into the cruel miser who uses music as a means of striking out at other people, as is exemplified in “I Hate People.” Whereas music might once have united Scrooge with others, his inability to participate in the traditional celebrations of music as a youth prompts his later employment of music as a means of venting his anger. As in the 1951 film, the scars from Scrooge’s past are what fuel his behavior in the present.

Bricusse’s approach proves extremely effective in this context. The shifts between dialogue and music throughout these scenes allow for a clear emphasis on the Dickensian drama and the development of the lead character. The fact that certain characters participate in certain songs and others do not allows for the unity between plot, characterization, and music that is so essential to an integrated book musical, as Scrooge’s inability to use music in a celebratory way highlights vital elements of his personality.

While Bricusse stays faithful to the basic sequence of shadows from Scrooge’s past presented by Dickens in the original novel, beginning with the boy Scrooge at school and tracing his growth up through his separation from Isabel, Menken takes far greater creative
liberties with this part of the story. The composer incorporates several conventions established in the 1951 film version. As in the Sim film, Fan is described as having died in childbirth. Later during a musical montage showcasing the young Scrooge’s growing greed, Mr. Fezziwig is run out of business by his hardhearted ex-protégé. Menken, like Langley, seeks to create a meaningful psychological portrait of Scrooge, rather than a brief biographical sketch; as such, he makes several radical changes regarding the class status of the protagonist. Whereas the Bricusse adaptation depicts Scrooge as a member of the middle class, Menken presents Scrooge as the eldest son in an insolvent working-class family. The composer briefly introduces (and summarily dispenses with) the immediate members of Scrooge’s family. Ebenezer’s father is presented as a debtor who has been sent to prison. Scrooge’s mother is also introduced, though she dies almost immediately after her husband is sent to jail. Finally, there is Fan, who, as in the novella, is announced as having died young.

Given how quickly these characters are eliminated, one might question the practicality of introducing them at all, but Menken utilizes their presence to help explain various facets of the protagonist’s personality. As Mr. Scrooge is led off to prison, he shouts a pathetic warning to his son: “Learn this lesson, Ebenezer: save your pennies! Make your fortune and keep it!” (13). Ebenezer is subsequently sent to work in a factory and does his best to endure his base occupation and low coworkers. Menken’s revisions to Scrooge’s childhood are obviously meant to create parallels between the character and his creator, Charles Dickens. While the effectiveness of this reading is debatable, Menken actively contributes to the culture text of the Carol by rewriting the protagonist’s past in hopes of better explaining his present behavior. His use of music here, particularly in the context of the mega-musical format, is highly successful.
As mentioned, most mega-musicals consistently reprise and recycle previously established musical motifs. Following Mr. Scrooge’s arrest, Mrs. Scrooge consoles her children by reprising a refrain that has already been sung once earlier in the musical (and that will be reprises again many times over, as is the custom in most mega-musicals): “Let the stars in the sky/Remind us of man’s compassion/Let us love till we die/And God bless us every one” (10). Later in the same sequence, Fan and Ebenezer sing a duet entitled “A Place Called Home,” which is reprises by Emily, Scrooge’s fiancée, shortly thereafter. The frequent reprises in Menken’s adaptation create thematic links between characters and situations. The fact that Emily reprises a song sung by Scrooge’s sister underscores the links between these two women, which are not difficult to perceive, as both Fan and Emily possess the capability to provide the younger Ebenezer with the stable, happy home he has lacked. Unfortunately, Scrooge declines this opportunity by choosing money over his fiancée and by failing to honor his sister’s memory, as epitomized by his rejection of his nephew.

The repetition of musical motifs here to underscore various themes allows for a greater understanding of Scrooge’s character; indeed, given the fact that the characters’ personalities often disappear against the larger mega-musical background, the constant repetition of certain refrains proves the only effective means of defining Scrooge’s personality. While other characters in the Menken adaptation consistently reprise the “God bless us every one” refrain, Scrooge loses sight of this particular air and is only capable of reprising it at the very end of the play following his redemption—in fact, Menken signals Scrooge’s redemption by finally having the protagonist reprise the refrain. Until that point, the melody is lost to him. Whereas Bricusse emphasizes the young Scrooge’s isolation by highlighting his inability to join in the celebration of music, Menken emphasizes the protagonist’s drive to become rich
along with his fear of destitution by stressing the fact that the spoken warning shouted by Mr. Scrooge has left a stronger impression than the refrain sung by Mrs. Scrooge. The repetition of the “God bless us every one” motif through reprises and underscoring serves as a constant reminder of the fact that Scrooge will need to reject the values of his current lifestyle and learn to appreciate the loving spiritual values represented by Tim, the Cratchits, Fan, his mother, and the general populace (all of whom sing the refrain at some point).

By reducing Scrooge to the working class, Menken depicts a more Americanized version of the character: the young Scrooge embodies the rugged individualism of the United States, and his desire to make his fortune is a variation on the American dream. Scrooge’s ability to rise above his humble beginnings also presents a more democratic vision of society than the one presented in the Bricusse version. It is undeniable that Menken’s Scrooge possesses some admirable qualities given his ability to overcome his impoverished background, but Menken is certain to illustrate the dangers of allowing such goals to consume you—a lesson that would clearly resonate with a wealthy American audience in modern day New York City. Whereas the Bricusse musical focuses on traditional themes with a decidedly British tenor, notably, the contrasts between the idyll of rural England and the starker urban London of the Victorian period, Menken focuses on more “global” issues which extend outside the English sphere. Here again, the different types of music used by the two composers help to reinforce their approaches to the material. By utilizing songs sporadically, Bricusse can highlight the English qualities of the source material while simultaneously depicting Scrooge’s individual character development through his alternation between sung and spoken words. Menken’s constant use of music and song presents a wider spectrum against which the macro-messages of the story can be magnified so as to appeal to an American audience.
Finally, the contrary depictions of Scrooge’s redemption in these two adaptations should be addressed. The presentation of Scrooge’s reformation is a vitally important element of any adaptation of *A Christmas Carol* and depictions of this event vary widely. Some adaptations emphasize the more subtle, interpersonal element, stressing Scrooge’s newfound love of people and his kindness towards those he has previously mistreated. Others present a more embellished redemption as Scrooge traverses London buying things for complete strangers, tossing money around haphazardly, and surprising the Cratchits with a sack full of gifts. The former is utilized in several non-musical adaptations of the story, including the 1951 classic. However, the latter depiction is far more suited to the form of a musical given the extroverted elements of this particular genre, and indeed, both the Bricusse and Menken adaptations incorporate huge final production numbers in which several earlier melodies are reprised as Scrooge rejoices with the entire London populace. However, both musicals also try to stress the restrained, personal elements of the redemption by starting with a solo sung by Scrooge. The key difference between the two adaptations is that Bricusse presents a more secularized redemption than Menken, and this divergence is perhaps the most significant display of the cultural disparities between the composers. Scrooge’s redemption in *Scrooge* contains no reflections on the role that God has played in his salvation, which is in keeping with the secular tone presented throughout the entire adaptation; it is continually stressed that Scrooge’s two alternatives are either making the most of life or suffering eternal damnation—the idea of earning a place in heaven as the ultimate goal seems absent. Conversely, the Menken adaptation presents several references to God and spirituality in the songs about Scrooge’s redemption, and the spectacle and materialism of the final big production number is counterbalanced by these religious elements. The very last song sung
in this adaptation, entitled “God Bless us Every One,” is presented as a chorale hymn.

In *Scrooge*, the reformed Ebenezer does not allude to any sort of spiritual or religious dimension in his redemption. Rather, the redemption seems a secularized change of heart as opposed to a religious awakening:

> I’ll begin again  
> I will build my life  
> I will live to know  
> That I’ve fulfilled my life  
> I’ll begin today  
> Throw away the past  
> And the future I build  
> Will be something that will last.

> I will take the time  
> I have left to live  
> And I’ll give it all  
> That I have left to give  
> I will live my days  
> For my fellow men  
> And I’ll live in praise  
> Of that moment when  
> I was able to begin again.

Though Scrooge does mention “a strong amen” in the final verse of the song, his claims that he will “thank the world” and live for his “fellow men” are decidedly secular assertions.

While Scrooge has most certainly changed, the lack of spirituality behind his reformation complicates our assessment of the final sequence. Ebenezer’s buying out Mr. Pringle’s toy store and spending his money on the Cratchits and other Londoners he meets makes for a delightful spectacle, but it simultaneously accentuates the commercialized and materialistic elements of the modern celebration of the holiday. Scrooge is so busy buying things and enjoying the time he has left on earth that he does not acknowledge the spiritual meaning of the holiday and the chance he has been given to earn an eternal reward once his time has run out. This discrepancy is never more evident than when he dons a Father Christmas costume
and literally steps into the role of Santa Claus—the materialism associated with the
secularized version of St. Nicholas replaces any sort of religious element associated with the
newborn Christ. When Scrooge, still in his Father Christmas regalia, arrives at the cathedral
and quickly persuades the choir boys to join in the reprise of “Thank You Very Much,” it is
obvious that savior of the modern Christmas is Santa Claus. The sight of people leaving the
church to follow Father Christmas is an indication of the fact that the spiritual elements of the
holiday have been displaced by the modern, secular, material elements. Even the Cratchit
family approaches Christmas in this way; during “Christmas Children,” Bob sings “I
suppose/That children everywhere/Will say a Christmas prayer/Till Sant a brings their
Christmas things.” The idea of children praying to Santa epitomizes the worldly view of
Christmas presented in the film.

In his text, Davis points out that many film critics disapproved of this displacement and
felt it cheapened Scrooge’s redemption, though he likewise acknowledges the importance of
recognizing that Scrooge has learned of the good that money can do when it is spent on
others: “But from a New Age perspective, Scrooge could be seen as one who had given up
the miserly view of money as means of narcissistic self-aggrandizement to adopt the
economics of affluence. Buying toys for all the children of the streets and promising to hire
the best doctors to cure Tiny Tim, he uses money for the pleasure it will give” (Lives 205).
What Davis takes exception to is the larger secularized view of the Carol as presented in the
Bricusse adaptation: “The absence of the biblical subtext in Scrooge makes this strong amen
difficult” (Lives 206). As mentioned, Scrooge’s ultimate fate is constantly described as
hovering between two outcomes: he will either end up in hell or learn to enjoy living life in
the present. Scrooge is not alone in his focus on the mortal coil, however. The Cratchits are
likewise depicted as living for the moment as opposed to turning toward the eternal. Unlike their literary predecessors, Tiny Tim and his father do not go to church together on Christmas, and during the song “Beautiful Day,” Tiny Tim places all of his focus on celebrating the here and now as opposed to hoping for the eternal joys open to man through the birth of Christ: “Then the beautiful day/That I dream about/Would be here/And now.” The Ghost of Christmas Present makes a similar assessment before leaving Scrooge in the hands of his successor: “There is never enough time to do or say all the things that we would wish. The thing is to try and do as much as you can in the time that you have. Remember Scrooge, time is short, and suddenly, you’re not there anymore.” This ambiguous sentiment seems at odds with the message of Christmas, which emphasizes the eternity of man’s spirit. Equally disheartening is the absence of any talk of paradise, particularly given the fact that the film actually incorporates a morbidly humorous scene in which Marley welcomes Scrooge to hell and sets him up as Lucifer’s personal clerk. The idea of there being a hell and no heaven in the world presented by Bricusse is troubling given that this film is an adaptation of a story that celebrates the redemptive power of Christmas.

Although Guida has nothing but good things to say about Scrooge, labeling it as one of the best film versions of the Carol ever produced, he too acknowledges the secular tone of the adaptation, though he does his best to excuse it: “There is a decidedly secular tone about the film that would certainly be in keeping with its times” (Guida’s emphases, 110). In trying to make excuses for the excision of the spiritual elements of Scrooge’s conversion, Guida underscores the criticality of such elements to the meaning of the story. His emphasis on the decade in which the film was produced is significant, but Menken’s adaptation, produced more than twenty years later, seems to discredit Guida’s argument that Bricusse’s film is
simply a product of the postmodern age. Menken began writing his musical even closer to
the turn of the century, and yet, the composer was clearly concerned with keeping God in
Christmas (and moreover, in Scrooge’s redemption.) The song that Menken’s Scrooge sings
following his salvation contains numerous direct references to spirituality and prayer.
“Yesterday, Tomorrow, and Today” is a solemn invocation by Scrooge for the assistance of
God in helping to complete his transformation:

    I can see a future full of beauty
    And my spirit starts to fly
    I can change the world
    Yes! It’s my duty
    God forgive me
    Let me try!
    I’ll spend my fortune
    On the one’s who need me
    Go where kindness
    And my conscience lead me
    Give my heart and soul to all,
    God speed me on my way
    And to God I pray
    Let me live the lessons of the spirits
    Yesterday, Tomorrow, and Today

    Let the stars in the sky
    Remind us of man’s compassion
    Let us love till we die
    And God bless us every one. (20-21)

Rather than simply acknowledging that he will “begin again,” Scrooge reveals that an actual
spiritual transformation has taken place. While Bricusse’s Scrooge makes reference to
casting off the past and living in the present, Menken’s Scrooge is not interested in living
solely for the moment. Rather, like his literary predecessor, he seeks to live in the past, the
future, and the present, “yesterday, tomorrow, and today”—his hopes are for something
eternal that transcends time itself, and enjoyment of the present is just one element of
something much larger. Though Menken’s Scrooge, like Bricusse’s, immediately proceeds
to atone for his past behavior by spending his money on others, the materialism is counterbalanced by the emphasis on the spiritual change in the protagonist. Furthermore, Menken does not end his musical with the celebratory finale. He includes one last song during the bows, and it is sung as a choral number by the entire cast. “God Bless Us Every One” is the closest that either adaptation comes to incorporating an actual religious hymn into the score, and this finale stresses the spiritual elements of Christmas as opposed to the secular:

Let the stars in the sky
Remind us of man’s compassion
Let us love till we die
And God bless us every one

In your heart there’s a light
As bright as a star in heaven
Let it shine through the night
And God bless us every one

Till each child is fed
Till all men are free
Till the world becomes a family

Star by star up above
And kindness by human kindness
Light this world with your love
And God bless us every one. (23)

Menken’s decision to end his adaptation with a religious choral number as opposed to the over-the-top reprise reflects his contradictory approach to the topic of Scrooge’s redemption; it is not enough to simply show Scrooge spending his money on others. Rather, Menken lays considerable stress on the religious dimensions of Scrooge’s transformation and his new spirituality, which will guide all of his charitable actions. Clearly, the discrepancies between the two adaptations are not matters of time, but rather, of place: the secular tone of the Bricusse adaptation is in keeping with the increasingly secularized tenor of the United
Kingdom, while Menken’s more spiritual depiction attests to the strong presence of religion in the United States.

Placing this issue in the context of the musical techniques employed by the two composers, one again finds that their respective approaches supplement their visions of the story. “I’ll Begin Again” is firmly integrated into the musical, and the sequence of songs that follows keeps Scrooge at the forefront as he leads the chorus in all of the reprises. Throughout the film, the integrated, book musical technique has allowed Bricusse to place Scrooge, the character, at the focal point of the adaptation. Even if his redemption is a decidedly secular one, it is still his redemption. Conversely, Menken’s large-scale approach to the story allows him to emphasize the more spiritual elements of the redemption story because the character of Scrooge is less important in the grander scheme of the mega-musical. Rather, Scrooge is simply a catalyst for the more universal (and more spiritual) message that Menken puts forth in the final sequence of his adaptation, a message that is epitomized in the chorale of “God Bless Us Every One” (which does not actually focus on Scrooge himself).

The contrasts between these two adaptations of Dickens’s most popular work reinforce Davis’s assertion that the Carol is an amorphous culture text that is constantly being reshaped. The different genres of the two adaptations allow the composers to take divergent approaches to the material based on their own cultural values. Nevertheless, the interplay between British and American literary (and theatrical) traditions as highlighted in the comparison of these two musicals does not change the fact that these two outstanding versions of Dickens’s best-loved work will remain the benchmarks against which any future musical adaptations of the Carol are measured.
Curtain Call
The Dickensian Musical in a Post-Mega-Musical Era

Alan Menken’s *A Christmas Carol* stands as perhaps the only example of a Dickensian mega-musical staged in the period when the mega-musical ruled Broadway. Though the era of the mega-musical has since passed, the influence of this trend in musical theater is still being felt, as many of the most successful shows of the past decade have maintained the same grandeur of the mega-musical movement, emphasizing spectacular scenery and stage effects while relying heavily on music to tell the story. Virtually every show that has found any sort of success on Broadway in the past several years has been marked in some way by the mega-musical trend. Furthermore, the mega-musical has forever changed the economic landscape of Broadway.

Nevertheless, the epic drama that so defined the mega-musical tradition has all but disappeared. Today, Broadway’s biggest hits have substituted fantasy and coming-of-age comedy for human drama, and some of the most hyped Broadway shows of the past several years have been marketed toward a very specific demographic: teenage and prepubescent girls. The success of shows like *Beauty and the Beast, The Lion King, Mamma Mia!*, *Hairspray, Wicked, Legally Blonde*, and *The Little Mermaid*, along with the popularity of Disney’s *High School Musical* series, epitomizes this shift.

Unfortunately, this new trend may ultimately prove troublesome for the evolution of the Dickensian musical. Since the era of the mega-musical has ended, the possibilities of Dickensian variations on this subgenre have decreased. The most recent Dickensian musical
to reach Broadway, Jill Santoriello’s *A Tale of Two Cities* (2008), was steeped heavily in the mega-musical tradition, and while this musical format seemed befitting of Dickens’s epic treatment of the French Revolution, *Tale* came to fruition about fifteen years too late.

Santoriello’s adaptation was the first new Dickensian musical produced in the post-mega-musical era, and though her adaptation of *A Tale of Two Cities* is not written in the exact same format as the Lloyd Webber/Boublil and Schönberg shows that dominated Broadway in the 1980s and early 90s, the influence of the mega-musical genre was obvious to both critics and audiences. Between its enormous sets, epic story, and pop-influenced musical score, *Tale* contained many of the traits that defined the mega-musical during its heyday. As such, comparisons between *Tale* and Boublil and Schönberg’s *Les Miserables* were inevitable.

Unsurprisingly, the mega-musical format opened up many possibilities for Boublil and Schönberg in adapting Hugo’s novel, particularly given that the epic, operatic form of the mega-musical seemed the only mold capable of containing the mammoth novel’s plot. Since the entire musical is sung-through, virtually no music is wasted and every song is just one part of the larger story. Even the mega-musical format cannot fully encapsulate the encyclopedic structure of the original text, however. Hugo’s meticulous depiction of historical events such as the Battle of Waterloo, along with his insights into the social injustices that existed at the time of his writing the novel, are eliminated in the adaptation. Rather than focus on the historical elements of the original story, Boublil and Schönberg center their show on the character of Jean Valjean and his attempts to redeem his life.

Nevertheless, much of the plot to *Les Miserables* is preserved. Notably, the first act of *Les Miz* covers a nearly twenty-year period in the life of the protagonist, and virtually every event in Valjean’s biography is retold onstage through music and singing. The sung-through
format is what allows for this compartmentalization, as hundreds and hundreds of pages of narrative prose can be successfully condensed into a single sequence of creative songs.

While the meticulous musical plotting of *Les Miz* through its operatic score is arguably its greatest strength, it is also somewhat problematic. Most of the show’s second act focuses on the uprising of the ABC students against the French government, an event which takes place over the course of one or two days—a sharp contrast to the twenty-year history chronicled in Act I. Furthermore, this subplot is almost completely divorced from the Valjean storyline, which consequently creates a sense of disunity between the first and second halves of the show. In his text on writing for musical theater, Richard Andrews contrasts the techniques utilized by Lionel Bart with those of Boublil and Schönberg, asserting that Bart’s abridged take on the plot of *Oliver Twist* is ultimately more effective because it prevents the viewer from being overwhelmed by the breadth of the original story: “In contrast, the first act of *Les Miserables* is like an American television miniseries, because it tries to cover too much ground” (22). While the operatic technique utilized by the composers does justice to Hugo’s plot, some of the rich thematic elements of the original story are lost in musical translation.

As a Dickensian musical, Santoriello’s *Tale* is one of *Oliver!*’s many progeny, though the impact of the mega-musical movement, and more specifically, of *Les Miz*, on the gestation of the show is likewise undeniable. While the adaptation is not sung-through as in the case of *Les Miz*, there is a great deal more singing than talking, and, just as in the Boublil and Schönberg musical, many of the songs seem to blend together without distinct transitions; there are moments when one is unsure of whether or not to start applauding. The fast continuity between songs in the musical score to *A Tale of Two Cities* is necessary given the breadth of the story that Santoriello is trying to tell. As in the case of *Les Miz*, the show is
driven heavily by its plot. Furthermore, just as Boublil and Schonberg reduced the scope of
the subject matter, opting to focus on a human drama instead of a historical drama,
Santoriello likewise excises the historical commentary from Dickens’s original text, choosing
instead to center the story on the character of Sydney Carton and his redemption.

In Santoriello’s adaptation, the historical allegory regarding the unavoidable realization
that oppression and abuse will provoke revolution and madness is secondary to the love
triangle between Carton, Lucie Manette, and Charles Darnay. The novel focuses on the
intertwining of these two separate plot threads, as Carton, out of his love for Lucie, faces off
against the inescapability of the French Revolution, and, to a certain extent, the inescapability
of history itself, as dictated by the narrator in the very first chapter: “But that Woodman and
that Farmer, though they work unceasingly, work silently, and no one heard them as they
went about with muffled tread” (8). J.M. Rignall writes that the final passages of the novel,
which focus on Carton’s vision of a hopeful future for both France and the Darnay family,
crystallize the character’s “victory” over historical inevitability (which is of course
epitomized more concretely in his successful attempt to save Darnay from the guillotine):
“However inadequately realized Carton’s prophecy may be in imaginative terms, it is
significant as a moment of resistance to the grimly terminal linearity and historical
determinism of the preceding narrative” (576). The relationship between Carton’s actions
and the historical themes of the novel remain largely unexplored in the musical adaptation,
which focuses mainly on the love story set against the backdrop of the Revolution.

This discrepancy is logical given that the love triangle seems a much more obvious subject
for musical adaptation than the historical allegory, much as the story of Valjean’s redemption
is a more suitable unifying thread for Boublil and Schönberg’s adaptation than any of the
historical elements included in the show. With the love triangle as the central storyline, it is
understandable why Carton becomes the lead character in the musical adaptation. However,
this shift ultimately results in a paradox of sorts, for as Rignall indicates, Carton is perhaps
the only character in the novel to overcome the historical forces that seem to be controlling
the fates of all the other individuals. As such, his story arc remains fundamentally divorced
from the Revolution plot until toward the end of the book. Thus, while Santoriello preserves
the historical setting of the novel, utilizing it as an exciting set of conditions against which to
tell the story of Carton’s redemption, the thematic significance of the love story, and
moreover, of Carton’s character, is lost. Ironically, Santoriello makes the same mistake as
Boublil and Schönberg, who focus three-quarters of Les Mis on the story of Valjean’s
redemption but ultimately fail to connect him to the story of the Paris uprisings because of
the omission of the historical commentary. The downside in both cases is that the storylines
seem to lose some of their overall poignancy in the absence of the historical context provided
in the novel. Though the mega-musical is perhaps the only musical form capable of
conveying the magnitude of both these epic, historical novels, the format allows for a less
sophisticated presentation of thematic issues through music than the traditional book musical,
which, with its more distinct transitions between spoken words and sung lyrics, allows for a
clearer appreciation of subtle themes.

From a practical standpoint, the external circumstances surrounding the release of A Tale
of Two Cities were far more important than these internal, textual issues in terms of the
show’s potential for success, and unfortunately, these circumstances were hardly
encouraging. The adaptation began previews in August of 2008, right around the beginning
of a severe recession which rocked the economy. Furthermore, the contrast between the epic
tenor of Santoriello’s adaptation and the fluffy tenor of the hit musicals currently dominating Broadway was immediately noticeable. Consequently, even before it debuted on Broadway, there was a hushed sense of fatalism about Tale.

Santoriello seemed hesitant to acknowledge the influence of the mega-musical on her piece. When asked about the structure of the show in comparison to its most obvious mega-musical forebear, Les Miz, she replied that Tale “is definitely more of a traditional book musical—not an opera.” (par. 5). Producer Ron Sharpe likewise dismissed the Les Miz/Tale connection, insisting that the adaptation had more in common with the traditions of the book musical than the mega-musical: “Our show is really an old-fashioned book musical, more like My Fair Lady than Les Miz, I kid you not,” (qtd. in Gerard, par. 17). Broadway columnist Jeremy Gerard rightly described this statement as “naïve,” for anyone could see that the structure and tone of Santoriello’s adaptation was far more evocative of Boublil and Schönberg than Lerner and Loewe. The efforts of the producer and the writer to downplay any relationship between their adaptation and Les Miserables seemed curious, especially given that Les Miz remains a beloved musical to this day—however, these efforts become slightly more understandable when one considers that the age of Les Miz has passed. By downplaying the correlation between Tale and Les Miz, Santoriello and Sharpe may have been trying to downplay the notion that their show was outdated. In Gerard’s article, producer and director Richard Jay Alexander acknowledged why this was an important tactic, especially given the current economic situation on Broadway: “I’d be terrified….It’s not a glamour musical, and you have to remember that Les Miz was in a different era” (qtd. in Gerard, par. 6). The epic mega-musical has seemingly become obsolete, especially when one considers the kind of shows which are currently drawing crowds to Broadway.
A Tale of Two Cities officially opened on September 18, 2008. It received poor reviews from critics, most of whom labeled it an inferior relic from the mega-musical period.

Richard Ouzounian of the Toronto Star described the show as “theatre at its worst” and was especially critical of the musical’s parallels to Les Miz:

From the ominous martial music that starts the show, through the contrapuntal marching-in-step first act finale, right down to the final song of self-revelation against a sky positively pocked with stars, this show wants to be Les Miserables so badly that you can practically taste it. It’s not unknown for a seminal work like Les Miserables to influence other authors, but when the homage grows perilously close to a Xerox copy, then attention, to turn Arthur Miller on his ear, must not be paid. (E12)

David Rooney put forth similar criticism in his review in Daily Variety, noting that Santoriello’s admission that she began work on the musical in the 80s, “underscores how outmoded it is in style and conception” and concluding that the adaptation is “a lumbering artifact – overwrought, under-nuanced and hopelessly old-fashioned” (47). Like Ouzounian, Rooney points out that Santoriello’s adaptation tries far too hard to duplicate the success of Les Miz. Virtually every major New York critic decried the musical in similar terms, with Joe Dziemianowicz of the Daily News sardonically writing: “In Les Miserables, a fervent cry goes out for ‘one day more!’ The creators and cast of A Tale of Two Cities, which opened last night, have taken that message to heart in trying to give the pop operetta one more revolution. The gears, however, are stuck in reverse. Tale...is so formulaic it feels recycled and reused, but not refreshed” (40). A negative review in the New York Times capped off this trend of unfavorably contrasting Tale with its mega-musical predecessor. Even more devastating than the notices were the box-office revenues, as dreary presales prefigured poor Broadway grosses. Toward the end of its run, the show was playing to 40% capacity crowds, and a premature closing seemed inevitable. A Tale of Two Cities limped along for seven weeks before it officially closed on November 9, 2008, after only sixty performances.
The failure of *A Tale of Two Cities* has put the future of the Dickensian musical in question, not simply because of the fact that the latest musical adaptation of a Dickens novel to reach Broadway has proved unsuccessful, but likewise because of the larger implications regarding the mega-musical format. It is perfectly understandable why Santoriello chose the mega-musical form for her adaptation, as containing Dickens’s story in a more traditional integrated show would likely have resulted in drastic cuts being made to the original text. Indeed, the future of the Dickensian musical seems intimately bound up with the mega-musical format simply because the only novels by Dickens which have yet to be adapted for the musical stage are among his most complicated and multifaceted works. The possibility of musical adaptations of novels like *Martin Chuzzlewit*, *Dombey and Son*, *Bleak House*, *Little Dorrit*, and *Our Mutual Friend*, along with revised adaptations of *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*, is enticing, but it seems as though any chance of these texts becoming musicals is dependent on the composer employing the mega-musical form; only a mega-musical could successfully preserve the original plot. Had Santoriello’s adaptation succeeded, a string of Dickensian mega-musicals might have been initiated, but given that the age of the mega-musical has seemingly passed and that audience tastes on Broadway have shifted to lighter fare, the chances of these Dickensian mega-musicals reaching fruition have waned significantly. Given the phenomenal enduring power of *Oliver!*, the potential for future musical adaptations of Dickens will always be tenable; however, in a post-mega-musical era, the question of just how to adapt Dickens’s more complicated works successfully to the musical stage is less easily answered. Whether the early decades of the 21st century will prove the best of times or the worst of times for the Dickensian musical remains to be seen.


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