

Rachel Schneider
RHE309K - The Rhetoric of the Musical
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Essay II

As we will be focusing in the second unit on discussing issues of delivery (how a particular theatrical staging of a musical is performed), and how delivery contributes to conveying arguments and meaning, for your second major writing assignment of this class you will be asked to compare two separate productions of one particular musical in one paper to argue how each builds a unique argument.

You may consider presentations in different media (for example, comparing the 2008 Broadway stage revival of *South Pacific* with the 2001 filmed version starring Glenn Close). As you write your paper, you will want to research each production you choose, including its original reception (using newspaper or magazine reviews, interviews with actors, directors, or production designers, advertisements, etc) to find evidence for your claims, as well as to learn more about the particulars of each (looking at pictures of characters in costume, sets, listening to cast recordings). You will want to think about how delivery affects meaning—how do the actors sing the songs differently? Do they change any lyrics or pronunciations to affect the meaning of the song? How do their gestures impact meaning? How does the visual staging of the performance create *ethos* and make arguments? This will be a 5-7 page double spaced paper with a required revision.

Specifics

As you write, you will need to think carefully about how you plan to arrange your paper to successfully navigate your discussion of the two separate productions, and to justify your argument why and in what matter the staging of the separate productions affects meaning to convey different arguments. (You may prefer to focus on one production in your discussion rather than trying to do equal service to both.) You may at some point want to consider how shifting cultural contexts and the audience's own position is likely to have changed, thus changing the meaning.

You will want to start off your paper with a clear argument about how and what has caused changes in the arguments of the separate productions. You will want at some point to make sure to summarize important plot points, facts, or design strategies, as well as summarizing historical and cultural information that will put the performances you discuss within their proper contexts. You will want to think carefully about how to arrange this information throughout the paper. (Note: You may want to include visuals as an appendix to the discussion; those will not count against the 5-7 page limit.)

You might conclude with some kind of statement about what is gained through thinking about how production histories develop or reflect changing attitudes, and what your example and argument can tell us about how texts are recycled and reproduced in culture to change meaning.

Delivery and the Musical: Some Terms and Questions

Delivery is the fifth canon of rhetoric, after invention, arrangement, style, and memory, and refers to how a text is performed by a speaker/rhetor. Delivery was an important part of the study of rhetoric for many generations when writing was less important than spoken performances, but in contemporary times most rhetoric texts focus on writing and not oral communication. Delivery most directly develops a speaker's *ethos* or *pathos*. This handout attempts to create a vocabulary for you to study and write clearly about performance texts for rhetorical purposes.

One particular issue which this handout asks you to take into account is the fact that our texts for this class are performances, and highly stylized ones at that. Musical theatre often uses a realistic style of acting to make the characters and their behavior seem familiar to its audiences, but since the musical considers people breaking out into spontaneous song and dance to be natural, the reality of the musical is heightened beyond common experience. However, rhetoric uses *appropriateness* to judge rhetorical performances within a given context. Aristotle acknowledged that actors could do more movement than rhetors, and engage in higher passions. Thus, what you should consider as you watch performances and attempt to describe them is how are the vocal and physical delivery *appropriate* to musical theater.

As you engage in rhetorical analysis of a performance, the two parts of delivery to which you should pay attention are the *vocal delivery* and the *physical delivery*.

The *vocal delivery* should describe both the spoken and sung parts of speech within the musical, and consists of the following major areas: *volume*, *tone*, *rhythm*, *tempo*, and *punctuation*.

- *Volume*: Refers to how loud or quiet an actor's vocal delivery may be. Loud speech and soft speech create different emotional effects upon their audiences.
- *Tone*: Refers to a sound's pitch; a tone might be either high or low. Music with a high tone sounds more cheerful or bright than music with a lower tone, which might be described as "dark."
- *Rhythm*: Refers to the beat of the song; in English departments, this would be called meter. Is the rhythm regular throughout, or varied? Is it prominent within the song? Heavily rhymed lines tend to have a regular rhythm. A regular rhythm can be soothing to an audience, and an intense one can arouse their passions; an irregular rhythm might be used to draw attention to an idea, or to disturb an audience. Are there a lot of long-held notes? or is the music short and staccato? The latter might be used to create a comic effect.
- *Tempo*: Refers to how slow or fast the song is. A slow tempo would be appropriate for romantic songs, and a fast tempo would be more appropriate for comic ones.
- *Punctuation*: Refers to the pauses and stops within speech. Punctuation determines where and how long an actor pauses between words, so how do such pauses create a dramatic effect?

The *physical delivery*, or *staging* as performers would refer to it, deals with how an actor moves his or her body during a performance, as well as the actor's relative position on the stage or

screen. Some things to consider for performance include *movement*, *direction*, *gestures*, and *spectacle*.

- *Movement*: Refers to a character's physical actions within a scene or song. An actor moving towards the audience may make them feel emotionally closer to a character, whereas moving away upstage may make them feel detached from that character. How does a character move in relation to the other characters on the stage? Are they separate or grouped together in some fashion? How does this reveal group identities, or emotional states? This can also refer to different levels of the stage—is the character located physically above or below other characters? Dolly Levi walking down a staircase in *Hello, Dolly!* means something different from Glinda in *Wicked* hanging suspended in the air during “Thank Goodness.”
- *Direction*: Refers to where the character faces on stage. If a character directly faces and addresses the audience, what kind of connection is established between that character and the audience that would be different if the character had their back to the audience? Which characters do they face and address, and which ones do they not?
- *Gestures*: Refers to how the actor moves his body parts to convey meaning. Gestures can be described in part by their magnitude (small and contained, or large and wide) and by their emotional force. Are they violent? smooth? emphatic? closed? open? Another thing to consider under this rubric is *performativity*: is the character trying to perform before an audience on stage? or the audience of which you are a part? or is the character being viewed in a private moment? This can also include *eye contact* and *posture*. A character slumping will seem less confident than one standing tall.
- *Spectacle*: Refers to dramatic, non-realistic stage effects. A good example of a musical that uses a lot of spectacle is *Phantom of the Opera*, which includes trap doors, fog machines, and moving boats among other things. How does the musical use spectacle to either enhance or create its own reality? and what effect does that have on its audience?

As you watch the performances in the next few weeks, try and pay attention to all of these features, and take notes as you watch about these moments in different songs and scenes.

*Short comparative rhetorical analysis of **Oklahoma!***

Since your second essay asks you to do a comparative analysis of two different productions of the same musical, this short comparative rhetorical analysis will help you practice the skills necessary for writing the paper. For this assignment, you will be required to write a short, 1-2 page comparative rhetorical analysis of one song from **Oklahoma!** You will choose another production of **Oklahoma!** and compare it to the 1999 London stage production you have already seen in class. (An example of this might be comparing how “Many a New Day” is performed in both the 1955 movie with the 1999 production, and how they imagine female agency differently, or how community is created differently in two different versions of “Oklahoma.”)

You will want to consider how the different costumes, sets, orchestrations, and performances affect the interpretation of the song, and you will want to make an argument about what different arguments each achieves, and how each does it. (Also important to consider: whether you choose a film or stage version, how does that also change the experience?) You will thus compare and contrast these features. Since this assignment *cannot be any longer than 2 pages, double-spaced*, you must focus this analysis very carefully, and should probably address no more than three major differences.

You will want to make sure to cite your two sources properly as well. (This can be written on the paper in MLA citation, or typed.)