Representation Of Jews On Broadway: Fiddler On The Roof

“You won’t succeed on Broadway is you don’t have any Jews” as sung in Spamalot, Jewish culture and theatre have been in partnership for hundreds of years. Modern Yiddish (or Jewish) theatre made its way to the United States of America in 1882 “after getting its start in 1876 in a wine garden in Romania” and then through Europe. (Glinter, 2016) Especially in New York City, Yiddish theatre became a leading source of entertainment for Jewish immigrants. As referenced in New York’s Yiddish Theater Exhibition at the Museum of the City of New York, from the late 19th to the mid-20th Century, Yiddish theatre found its place in the Lower East Side of Manhattan where it entertained “over 1.5 million first and second generation Eastern-European Jewish immigrants.” (2016) The decade following 1882 welcomed “the continuous arrival of actors and managers – rising young talent as well as established stars and company directors” and this led to “a rapid expansion of theatrical activity.” There was a recorded peak in emigration from Russia into the United States around 1891, and thus the ‘golden-age’ of Yiddish theatre began. (Thissen, 2004, p.174)

Moving into the 20th Century, the United States saw a rise in Yiddish variety acts and music, due to the continuous immigration of European Jews. The Yiddish theatre served as “the meeting place and forum of the Jewish community.” (Clurman, 1968) As Yiddish theatre developed, Jewish composers and writers began lending their talents to mainstream Broadway. However, many Jewish theatre creators didn’t want to use their ethnicity and backgrounds to influence their art because they wanted to be as American as possible due to the constant, and perhaps heightened discrimination of Jews during World War I and World War II. Supported by John Bush Jones, “the first two generations of Jewish writers of American musicals…were more concerned with becoming Americans than displaying their Jewishness on Broadway.” (2004, p.177) This mindset of creators lead to an absence of Jewish themes and characters, and therefore a lack of representation for Jewish-Americans, that was once so present in the golden-age of Yiddish Theatre in New York. However, Sholem Aleichem, creator of Fiddler on the Roof, had different ideas and stated; “I will never permit myself to give in to American taste and lower the standards of art.” (Soloman, 2013, p.15)

Prior to the progressive decade of the 1960’s, it is evident that Jewish representation in mainstream theatre consisted mostly of negative stereotypes that placed Jewish characters as the ‘other’ or the villain. For example, Shylock in Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice, Jean Anouilh’s Invitation of the Chateau and Arthur Miller’s The Price. Ellen Schiff notes that “plays with focus on the Jew as paradigm have the longest history.” (1982, p.155) Schiff writes about the idea of the Jew as ‘other’ explaining that not only did theatre show Jews as different to everyone else, but it also promoted the idea that every Jewish person was the same; “Jews not only resemble one another, they are different from everybody else.” (1982, p.96) Therefore, a Jewish character was an ideal extra to a piece. Schiff concludes by forming the understanding that ‘Jew’ can therefore be a synonym of ‘other’, discriminating them straight away.

The idea of ‘Jew’ as ‘other’ is perhaps most evident in Charles Dickens’ Oliver Twist, where at first, Fagin is never referred to by his name, but by ‘The Jew.’ Throughout the novel, Dickens refers to Fagin as “the Jew” or “the merry old Jew” in Chapter 15. The book makes this reference no less than 257 times in the first 38 chapters, and notably does not remark the

race and religion of other villain, Bill Sikes (Walsh, 2005) making the Jews instant outcasts and villains. Later, Fagin is portrayed on stage and in the film adaptation as the personified stereotype, alike the circulated Nazi propaganda images of World War II, seen with a large nose, top hat and traits that include greed, with his main source of income being pick-pocketing and training young orphans to do the same. Naturally, “members of the Jewish community were concerned from the outset.” (Walsh, 2005) Such representation of Jewish people would potentially damage the Jewish communities, more so than it already was. A fresh representation of ‘The Jew’ came from Sholem Aleichem, who created Tevye in Fiddler on the Roof; a poor, hard-working milk-man, dreaming of being that ‘rich man’ that was part of the well-known Jewish stereotype.