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Desirée J. Garcia: The Movie Musical

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Desirée J. Garcia: The Movie Musical

New Brunswick: Rutgers UP 2021 (Quick Takes: Movies and Popular Culture), 140 S., ISBN 9781978803787, EUR 18,-

In 1969, my mother took my sister and me to see a re-release of *The Sound of Music* (1965), the third highest ever grossing film in adjusted dollars. It was the third time that week she had taken us, and I remember we had to sit on the floor in the aisle with other patrons – it was that popular even as a re-release, and fire-regulations that lax. That is not bad for a film genre that has been maligned since the advent of sound as the killer of cinema as art, a product of crass commercialism offering only entertainment, whose expensive flops in the 1960s affected the financial viability of several major studios.

According to Desirée J. Garcia's excellent contribution to the „Quick Takes“ series, *The Musical Movie*, this genre not only offers escapism and familiar stereotypes but also, due to its ability to change with the times, cultures, and audiences, offers a space to tell stories about women, immigrants, and people of colour. She believes that musicals can still emulate some of their popularity of the 1930s, when it became the obvious film genre to utilise the innovation of sound, but in my view, it has been kept alive mostly through the intellectual property of Disney (*The Lion King* [1991], *Beauty and the Beast* [1994], *Frozen* [2013], *The Lion King* [2019]).

In contrast to my experience of *The Sound of Music*, just before Christmas last year, I watched Steven Spielberg's

excellent version of *West Side Story* (2021) in a nearly empty cinema. Garcia argues that musicals are as popular as they have ever been, but that they have often metamorphosised into reality contest shows (*American Idol* [2002-]) with their emphasis on the participants' back stories as much as their singing, and even audience participation events, the best example of which is *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975).

Garcia brings some interesting perspectives to how we should view this genre. First, the musical acts as its own archive; it „documents its own history and uses its own historical materials to interpret its present“ (p.8). *La La Land* (2016) is a particularly rich example that quotes from earlier Hollywood musicals starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Many musicals are about staging musicals or reconciling entertainment forms associated with other eras like jazz (*The Jazz Singer* [1927]) and ballroom dance – „[t]he musical persistently quotes“ (p.20). Federico Fellini's *Ginger and Fred* (1986) is even named after the famous dancing double act: „But rather than being a rejection of old or new forms, most musical films make an idealistic argument for integration and hybridisation“ (p.40). And because the genre consistently violates the otherwise rigid logic of classic narrative, it „provides performative metacommentary on the musical itself, Hollywood and entertainment“ (p.22).

In the middle section „The Musical as Society“, Garcia takes on the issue of authorship. Musicals can and do tell stories of marginalised groups and address issues of assimilation and intolerance directly (*The Gold Diggers of 1933* [1933]), but „consistently placed the reigns of control in the hands of people who do not share those perspectives“ (p.11). Garcia focuses on musicals produced outside the Hollywood system, such as Sally Potter’s *The Tango Lesson* (1997), and in some cases, in defiance of the Hollywood system, Spike Lee’s *Bamboozled* (2000). These non-escapist stories of ethnicity, race, and gender „demonstrate the musicals elasticity as a form and its ability to grapple with complexities of social relations“ (p.11). However, a mention of Bollywood musicals is conspicuous by its absence in this section.

In her final chapter „The Musical as Mediation“, Garcia assesses the genre’s

relationship to media and technology by focusing on the films of John Carney (*Once* [2007], *Begin Again* [2013], and *Sing Street* [2016]), which explore mediation in their narrative structure and form. Carney’s musicals „rewrite the genre’s conventions by showing how people create, play and listen to music“; he „employs analogue and digital objects as critical devices for human connection in the twenty-first century“ (p.113), strengthening communities and the family rather than weakening them.

The Movie Musical covers the genre’s history and conventions well while offering some interesting new perspectives on what the musical is, what it has done, and what it can do. But the financial failure of *Cats* (2019) and *West Side Story* (2021) indicates that today’s audience may be much less enamoured by the musical compared to its heyday.

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