

Strange Temporalities And Musical Theatre: Exploring the Unseen Dimensions of Time in Performance

Time plays a multifaceted role in musical theatre, shaping everything from the pacing of a plot to the emotional impact of a song. However, the ways in which time is experienced and represented in musical theatre often extend beyond the conventional linear progression of events. This article delves into the strange temporalities of musical theatre, examining how performances can create and manipulate different perceptions of time, allowing audiences to experience moments of stasis, anticipation, and even time travel.

Nonlinear Narratives and Temporal Disruptions

Musical theatre often employs nonlinear narratives that challenge the traditional cause-and-effect progression of time. In shows like "Company" by Stephen Sondheim, the story unfolds through a series of vignettes that shift back and forth in time, presenting the protagonist's relationships at different stages of his life. This technique allows the audience to witness the interconnectedness of events and gain a deeper understanding of the character's development.



Doing the Time Warp: Strange Temporalities and Musical Theatre by Sarah Taylor Ellis

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In some cases, temporal disruptions become a central element of the performance. In musicals such as "Fun Home" by Jeanine Tesori and Lisa Kron, time warps and overlaps, placing past and present moments side by side. This juxtaposition creates a sense of emotional resonance, allowing the audience to experience the protagonist's memories and emotions as if they were happening in real time.

Suspended Moments and Temporal Stasis

Musical theatre performances have the ability to create moments of suspended animation, where time seems to slow down or even stop. Through the use of slow-motion choreography, extended musical interludes, or atmospheric lighting, these moments create a sense of heightened emotion and anticipation. In "Les Misérables" by Claude-Michel Schönberg and Alain Boublil, the iconic song "One Day More" serves as a moment of collective reflection, where the characters' hopes and fears are laid bare in a timeless expanse.

Some musicals explore temporal stasis even more explicitly. In shows like "Sunday in the Park with George" by Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine, characters literally pause the action to contemplate the passage of time and the complexities of human existence. These moments of reflection offer a unique opportunity for the audience to engage with the themes of the show and consider the nature of their own mortality.

Time Travel and Explorations of Historical Moments

Musical theatre also offers a unique platform for exploring historical moments and time travel. In shows like "Hamilton" by Lin-Manuel Miranda, the audience is transported to the American Revolution and witnesses the events of the founding fathers' lives through a contemporary musical lens. By seamlessly blending past and present elements, these performances encourage audiences to reconsider the impact of history on the present day.

In "Six: The Musical" by Toby Marlow and Lucy Moss, six of Henry VIII's wives are brought together in a modern-day pop concert, where they share their stories of love, loss, and empowerment. This anachronistic approach allows the audience to connect with historical figures on a more relatable level, breaking down the barriers of time and challenging traditional narratives.

The Role of Music in Shaping Temporal Experiences

Music plays a crucial role in shaping the temporal experiences within musical theatre performances. Through tempo, rhythm, and melody, music can create a sense of urgency, relaxation, or even timelessness. In fast-paced numbers, the music drives the action forward, creating a sense of anticipation and excitement. Conversely, slower tempos and legato melodies can create a more contemplative atmosphere, inviting the audience to savor the moment and reflect on the emotions being expressed.

Furthermore, the use of recurring melodies or leitmotifs can create a sense of cyclical time, where past events are echoed in the present or future. This

technique reinforces the interconnectedness of the narrative and adds depth to the characters' experiences.

The strange temporalities of musical theatre offer a unique and immersive way to explore the multifaceted nature of time. Through nonlinear narratives, temporal disruptions, suspended moments, time travel, and the power of music, musical theatre performances invite audiences to experience time in all its complexity and wonder. Whether they are witnessing the interconnectedness of events, reflecting on the passage of time, or journeying through different historical epochs, audiences are transported to a realm where the boundaries of time dissolve, allowing for profound emotional experiences and a deeper understanding of human existence.

In the words of the iconic musical "Rent" by Jonathan Larson, "Time flies, time waits for no one." But through the transformative power of musical theatre, time becomes our plaything, a malleable canvas upon which we can paint the colors of our emotions, memories, and dreams.



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