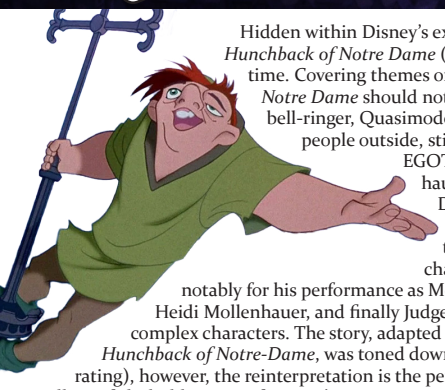

THE FRIDA ZINEMA PRESENTS
MUSICAL MARCH MADNESS
MARCH 2025
ISSUE #7

# Why Disney's Best Musical Isn't Talked About

By Julia Petty

@juliapetty_16

PettyWap



Hidden within Disney's expansive filmography lies Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996), arguably the darkest and most mature animated film of all time. Covering themes of lust, genocide, and racism, to name a just few, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* should not be dismissed as simply a "kid's movie". The story follows a deformed bell-ringer, Quasimodo, who although is held captive within Notre Dame by the fear of the people outside, still yearns to explore the world. The mesmerizing score composed by EGOT (Emmy, Grammy, Oscar, Tony) winner Alan Menken, utilizes the haunting and titular sound of bells to create a recurring motif of Notre Dame as a character. The lyrics, written by three time Grammy and Academy Award winner Stephen Schwartz, have an operatic feel to them, with every song bolstered by the choral ensemble. The characters, Quasimodo, voiced and sung by Tom Hulce known most notably for his performance as Mozart in *Amadeus*, Esmerelda, voiced by Demi Moore and sung by Heidi Mollenhauer, and finally Judge Claude Frollo voiced and sung by Tony Jay, provide a trifecta of complex characters. The story, adapted by Tab Murphy from Victor Hugo's 1831 French Gothic novel *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, was toned down from the original text (Disney had some trouble securing a "G" rating), however, the reinterpretation is the perfect fit for the musical. All of these elements set up to create the allure of *the* hidden gem of Disney's Renaissance era. The two songs below are the heart and soul of this movie:

## "The Bells of Notre Dame"

Even before the classic 90s Disney logo pops up on screen, the soft singing of a chorus with bells tolling sets up for the first visual of the film. Cutting starkly from black, the ethereal hand-drawn visuals of Notre Dame high above the clouds, create an epic and astounding picture that is now accompanied by a bellowing orchestration as the chorus grows louder and operatic. Once the camera pans down below the clouds to the underbelly of Paris, "The Bells of Notre Dame" begins and the audience is introduced to the narrator and leader of the Romani people in Paris, Clopin, voiced and sung by Paul Kandel, who sets the stage of Quasimodo's beginnings and Frollo's cruelty. This opening scene is one of the most awe-inducing forms of storytelling in cinema, made almost entirely from the power of lyrics and composition of "The Bells of Notre Dame". Mentioned at the beginning of the song, Clopin states how this is "...a tale of a man and a monster". Judge Claude Frollo is presented as a punitive and controlling figure, "Longing to purge the world of vice and sin / And he saw corruption everywhere except within". This lyric single-handedly described the perfect epitome of contradiction within a villain, leading to increasingly desperate and depraved acts that drive the story. Frollo chases a group of Romani people attempting to flee the city in fear of the laws and societal impacts he has instilled in Paris. Within the group is Quasimodo and his mother, the latter who is killed by Frollo on the steps of Notre Dame. Frollo attempts to kill Quasimodo as well after witnessing his face and proclaiming him an "unholy demon", however the archdeacon of the church witnesses the scene and stops the murder. Frollo looks up at the now haunting gargoyles of Notre Dame, "And for one time in his life of power and control / Frollo felt a twinge of fear for his immortal soul". So, Frollo names him Quasimodo, meaning "half-formed" and confines him to the bell towers, ending the introduction to the story. Clopin ends the song with "Who is the monster and who is the man?" repeating the theme from earlier except in the form of a question. That question is already answered for the audience before even seeing Quasimodo, but for the rest of Paris and its characters including Quasimodo himself, they first experience the fallout of Frollo grappling with his denial of his own disturbing desires before they realize the truth.

## "Heaven's Light/Hellfire"

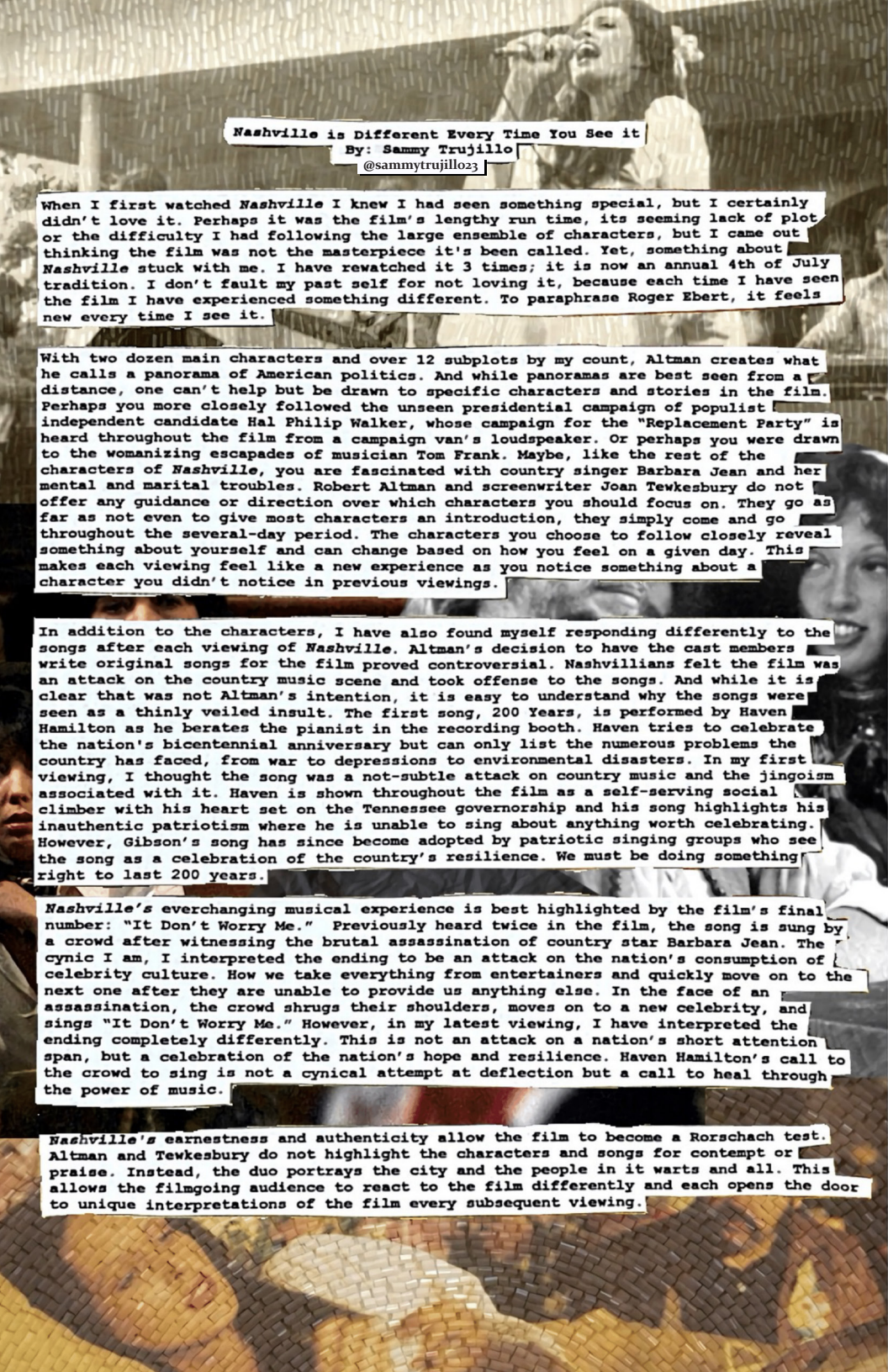
Frollo's obsession with his radical and racist form of "justice" rears its head when he falls in lust with the heroine of the story, Esmerelda. Quasimodo on the other hand, after convincing himself to see the world outside even for just one day, falls in love with Esmerelda, when she shows him kindness for the first time in his life. Interestingly enough, Esmerelda doesn't choose either of these men, instead falling in love with a side character, denying Quasimodo the typical "happily ever after". Instead the story focuses on having Quasimodo love himself first, as learning to love others comes after. Esmerelda serves as a catalyst of change and freedom. The contradictions of Quasimodo's innocent and wholesome version of love with Frollo's dark fixation on Esmerelda are highlighted by "Heaven's Light/Hellfire". Violins swell as Quasimodo starts singing about how he has watched multitudes of people in love from his view upon the bell tower, "They had a kind of glow about them / It almost looked like heaven's light". He sings how he thought he would never experience those feelings, due to his face. Esmerelda then appears in his life: "But suddenly an angel has smiled at me / And kissed my cheek without a trace of fright". Remencisint of the realization of the Phantom at the end of the titular *The Phantom of the Opera*, Quasimodo receives a genuine act of care despite the deformity that has controlled his life. Unlike the Phantom, Quasimodo, in the animated version (the novel is a different story), never turns to darkness, even after Frollo has abused and brainwashed him into hating himself. Esmerelda is the one to bring him out from under the grasp of Frollo, and finally learn to start loving himself.

The second half of the song, the audience realizes the true extent of Frollo's infatuation with Esmerelda after meeting her at the same festival Quasimodo does. Horns and bass underline the chorus as Frollo begins singing to the Virgin Mary: "Beata Maria, you know I'm so much purer than / The common, vulgar, weak, licentious crowd". He first states his superiority to others and his perceived piousness to the church. (Sidenote: One of the several changes Disney made to the film from the book included making Frollo a Judge rather than an Archdeacon as in the novel to avoid controversy.) Then he confesses to Mary: "Then tell me Maria, why I see her dancing there / Why her smouldering eyes still scorch my soul". In order to cope with the guilt he feels, Frollo turns to blame, blaming Esmerelda for casting a spell on him. Then in one of the best lines in the film Frollo belts to an imagined cast of specters from hell: "It's not my fault / If in God's plan / He made the devil so much stronger than a man". Frollo then melts into the red-hooded spirits, symbolizing his choice to give in to evil and for Esmerelda into a horrible ultimatum: either be with him, or burn at the stake. (Ironically, this is also very similar to the Phantom's ultimatum with Christine.) Due to Frollo's warped dedication to religion and justice, his repressed nature comes out in full horror unleashing itself on all of the Romani people. He does eventually light almost all of Paris on fire in an attempt to capture Esmerelda, but is ultimately foiled by Quasimodo on the buttresses of Notre Dame. Frollo then faces the might and guilt of Notre Dame and falls to his death.

"The Bells of Notre Dame" and "Heaven's Light Hellfire" are some of the best songs in musical history. *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* was so successful the Walt Disney Company turned it into a musical for the stage as well. Unfortunately, outside of the musical theater stage, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, is rarely mentioned by Disney due to its very mature and dark nature. One might see Clopin in the parks on a rare 90s night, but aside from the rare, and random niche references, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* was left in the darkness, but not forgotten.

### Some tidbits for fun:

- The producer of this film used Amon Goeth from *Schindler's List* as inspiration for Judge Claude Frollo
- In the original novel Archdeacon Frollo has Esmerelda hanged and then Quasimodo throws Frollo off the Notre Dame
- In the original novel people find a deformed skeleton embracing another, implying that Quasimodo sought her out after her death and then died there
- *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* originally received a "PG" rating so they had to lower the volume of Frollo sniffing Esmerelda's hair allowing for a "G" rating
- In 1993 Cydni Lauper was the first actor cast for filming, thinking she was cast for Esmerelda she was surprised to find out she was cast for one of the gargoyle side characters. She didn't end up taking the role.
- The side gargoyle characters were initially supposed to be named Chaney, Laughton, and Quinn after the people who portrayed Quasimodo in previous adaptations, however Disney changed the names fearing a lawsuit.



# *Nashville* is Different Every Time You See it

By: Sammy Trujillo

@sammytrujillo23

When I first watched *Nashville* I knew I had seen something special, but I certainly didn't love it. Perhaps it was the film's lengthy run time, its seeming lack of plot or the difficulty I had following the large ensemble of characters, but I came out thinking the film was not the masterpiece it's been called. Yet, something about *Nashville* stuck with me. I have rewatched it 3 times; it is now an annual 4th of July tradition. I don't fault my past self for not loving it, because each time I have seen the film I have experienced something different. To paraphrase Roger Ebert, it feels new every time I see it.

With two dozen main characters and over 12 subplots by my count, Altman creates what he calls a panorama of American politics. And while panoramas are best seen from a distance, one can't help but be drawn to specific characters and stories in the film. Perhaps you more closely followed the unseen presidential campaign of populist independent candidate Hal Philip Walker, whose campaign for the "Replacement Party" is heard throughout the film from a campaign van's loudspeaker. Or perhaps you were drawn to the womanizing escapades of musician Tom Frank. Maybe, like the rest of the characters of *Nashville*, you are fascinated with country singer Barbara Jean and her mental and marital troubles. Robert Altman and screenwriter Joan Tewkesbury do not offer any guidance or direction over which characters you should focus on. They go as far as not even to give most characters an introduction, they simply come and go throughout the several-day period. The characters you choose to follow closely reveal something about yourself and can change based on how you feel on a given day. This makes each viewing feel like a new experience as you notice something about a character you didn't notice in previous viewings.

In addition to the characters, I have also found myself responding differently to the songs after each viewing of *Nashville*. Altman's decision to have the cast members write original songs for the film proved controversial. Nashvillians felt the film was an attack on the country music scene and took offense to the songs. And while it is clear that was not Altman's intention, it is easy to understand why the songs were seen as a thinly veiled insult. The first song, 200 Years, is performed by Haven Hamilton as he berates the pianist in the recording booth. Haven tries to celebrate the nation's bicentennial anniversary but can only list the numerous problems the country has faced, from war to depressions to environmental disasters. In my first viewing, I thought the song was a not-subtle attack on country music and the jingoism associated with it. Haven is shown throughout the film as a self-serving social climber with his heart set on the Tennessee governorship and his song highlights his inauthentic patriotism where he is unable to sing about anything worth celebrating. However, Gibson's song has since become adopted by patriotic singing groups who see the song as a celebration of the country's resilience. We must be doing something right to last 200 years.

*Nashville's* everchanging musical experience is best highlighted by the film's final number: "It Don't Worry Me." Previously heard twice in the film, the song is sung by a crowd after witnessing the brutal assassination of country star Barbara Jean. The cynic I am, I interpreted the ending to be an attack on the nation's consumption of celebrity culture. How we take everything from entertainers and quickly move on to the next one after they are unable to provide us anything else. In the face of an assassination, the crowd shrugs their shoulders, moves on to a new celebrity, and sings "It Don't Worry Me." However, in my latest viewing, I have interpreted the ending completely differently. This is not an attack on a nation's short attention span, but a celebration of the nation's hope and resilience. Haven Hamilton's call to the crowd to sing is not a cynical attempt at deflection but a call to heal through the power of music.

*Nashville's* earnestness and authenticity allow the film to become a Rorschach test. Altman and Tewkesbury do not highlight the characters and songs for contempt or praise. Instead, the duo portrays the city and the people in it warts and all. This allows the filmgoing audience to react to the film differently and each opens the door to unique interpretations of the film every subsequent viewing.

# Mamma Mia is Fast and Furious for the Girlies

By: Emily Krauss

@krausgangordye

*Fast and Furious* is famous for "family." The franchise is still going strong today with spinoffs and they have even gone into space. It started as a *Point Break* spinoff but with cars and still continues to focus on racing and family. It's continued even after Paul Walker's death and continues to captivate audiences despite not being too plot heavy.

*Mamma Mia*!, although a movie musical, also focuses on family. It features catchy songs, well known actors, and shouldn't be taken too seriously. *Mamma Mia!* is the Fast and Furious, but for the girlies.

I have watched *Mamma Mia!* so many times when hanging out with my friends that my mom jokes that it is the only movie that we ever watch. Yes I have seen other films but *Mamma Mia!* remains to be one of my favorite movie musicals (adapted from the original stage production). It's entertaining, and aren't movies meant to do just that?

*Mamma Mia!* tells the story of Sophie (Amanda Seyfried) who is about to get married to Sky. She wants her dad to walk her down the aisle, but OOPS! Who IS her dad? She reads her mother's diary and learns that her mom, Donna (Meryl Streep), had affairs with three different men the summer she was conceived. So she does the most logical thing and invites all of them to her wedding, but her mom doesn't know.

Chaos ensues: Donna eventually finds out that all three men have arrived: Bill (Stellan Skarsgard), Harry (Colin Firth), and Sam (Pierce Brosnan) and Sophie tries to get time with all of them to figure out who her actual dad might be. Along the way we meet Sophie and Donna's friends who help to add more fun to the ABBA musical numbers. In the end, Sophie decides not to get married to Sky, but rather just wants to travel the world with him. Donna and Sam get married instead because they have the most romantic tension and unresolved feelings.

Even though the easiest thing for Sophie to do would be to take a paternity test, she doesn't. Instead, all of the men stay in her life because they care about her, because they have created their own family.

*Mamma Mia*! also got a sequel which focuses on Donna's past affairs and shows Sophie's life as she has continued on after Donna's passing. Her and Sky still aren't married, but she is pregnant with his child. All three of her "dads" come back into town, and naturally there is even more ABBA. Again, the movie shows that blood family doesn't really matter, but rather it's about the family you find along the way (and there's a third movie coming which means even more ABBA and again probably not finding out who Sophie's dad is).

*Fast and Furious* and *Mamma Mia!* have become their own successful franchises with large followings. There's glaring plot holes and ridiculous storylines, but that doesn't matter. What does matter is the fun the viewer has while watching. The *Mamma Mia!* movies are uplifting and entertaining. With Fast and Furious, you know what you're getting into, and there's the classic memes about, once again, chosen family.

So let *Mamma Mia!* keep going even if Sophie never cares about who her real dad is, let it entertain us for many girls' nights to come and give us inspiration for our getaways to Greece. And who knows, maybe one day the cast will have a musical number set in space

# THE SOUND OF LABOR:

## THE EXPRESSION OF ECONOMIC STRUGGLE THROUGH WORK SONGS

by Brian Ly


Since nearly the very beginning of the talkie era of film, the notion of the work song has existed as a sort of natural evolution of the folk tradition of singing to the rhythmic syncopation of labor, expressing the emotional frustration of the working class plight, and protesting injustice, existing as a form of pure catharsis that brings the diegesis back down to earth in contrast to the glitz and glamor of the more bombastic side of musicals that blur the lines of reality and fantasy. Music can be something that personifies the difficult yet rewarding work in the chants of "Heigh-Ho" by the dwarfs who toil away at hard labor in the mines, yet relish the joy of life and nature when the eponymous princess in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* invades their home and assists in house chores with a "Whistle While You Work." They can be an expression of hope that can one day profess "We're In the Money," as you see from the showgirls in the opening number of *Gold Diggers of 1933* sing and dance to the tune of economic recovery and prosperity after the dark times of The Great Depression. Sure, this might all sound like capitalist propaganda, especially as a reflection of the economic and political situation at the time, but just as the Hollywood film itself has evolved, so do the sounds and attitudes of people at work.

The veneer of blind optimism and hope of the prewar period is immediately washed away as people have to grapple with the sheer horror of the wartime atrocities. As they begin to confront the reality of the world, both in terms of accepting human nature as well as moving on from past trauma to pivot into the future with the economic rebuild and the establishment of political structures and peace agreements to prevent this from ever happening again, there's a natural amnesiac quality that exists in humans to maintain sanity, but what's different in the next era of economic optimism is that expectations are inherently tempered and better reflect a grounded perspective in terms of their outlook on the world rather than representing the dream scenario that defined the early days of the Hollywood musical. In a marked shift from previous depictions of marginalized groups as more caricatures, we see Puerto Ricans take center stage in *West Side Story* as real, complex individuals with fully fleshed personalities and concerns that stretch beyond stereotypes. There's an idealism of the American Dream as Anita imagines limitless possibilities of life in "America," not necessarily because she has any illusion that these lofty goals are ever achievable within a lifetime given her disadvantaged position in society, but it sure beats the hopelessness and the complete lack of opportunity and social mobility back home.

Another perspective of American economic prosperity is presented in *You Can Succeed, Too*, where the president's daughter, who has been brought back to the Tokyo branch to reform an unproductive department, professes how much more efficiently things are done "In America" compared to the performative nature of the Japanese work style that gives the impression of productivity through optics and schmoozing rather than actual work getting done. While there can be an entire debate on the validity of this notion as a whole, this is directly contrasted in the character songs where we see Frankie Sakai performing a ridiculous morning routine where his room is designed to facilitate as efficient a way to get ready in the morning as possible as he jumps straight into lifting weights as he gets up in the morning and breaks a baguette on his head in the middle of changing singing "You Can Succeed, Too" as he enumerates all the behaviors and shortcuts necessary to succeed in the corporate level, which stands in contrast to his laidback rival who seems to luck into success yet is only ever thinking of vacationing to the "Taklamakan" Desert and the barmaid they interact with at an after-hours drinking party who yearns for simpler times in "Come to the Countryside." We see the warring philosophies clash as the president's daughter is on a work trip with the rival, where her ideas of rationalism "In America" do nothing to faze the man whose mind is stuck in "Taklamakan," and in a duet where each song is layered on top of one another, his dreamy sensibility overpowers her as she too joins in his song, falling in love in the process. Meanwhile, the sly efforts of the lead result in successive failures, breaking out into a massive dance number with backup drunk salarymen slurring the lyrics of the altered "You Can't Succeed, Too" as they go on a rampage through town and a construction site, culminating in Busby Berkeley-esque formations until they fall asleep at the stroke of midnight. He is rescued while a complete mess by the barmaid, who performs a reprise in her pleading him to "Come to the Countryside" with her, and the film finishes with a polyphony of all of the character songs on a constructed set as they all jump up as the film ends.

The trepidation towards corporate culture in the initial economic recovery phases shifts to a more pronounced cynicism in the decades following the war, as women have shifted to become a permanent part of the workforce yet are living similar qualities of life on dual income that they had enjoyed on a single income while still being responsible for child-rearing responsibilities. In essence, purchasing power for the average person in modern society has effectively halved. While not actually a movie musical, there probably is no film that better describes the contemporary working experience than *9 to 5*, where in spite of its bouncy tune, the eponymous theme song encapsulates the sort of cynical outlook of corporate life that often doesn't reward hard work and thrives off the exploitation of labor by extracting every second of time and amount of effort until you're left out to dry, to the point that most people's hours definitely extend beyond this mythical "9 to 5" because of the unpaid lunch break, not to mention the overreach that has since occurred in the so-called working revolution caused by the pandemic where the separation of work and home has blurred with the remote work normalization and the subsequent return to office mandates as the commute that had been deemed unnecessary during a time when everyone proved that it could work without has been seemingly instantaneously forgotten in this alleged new normal that is ironically worse than the before times.

Speaking of which, an alternate space that has become a quintessential part of the work experience is the commute. Whereas the iconography of the car has historically represented the idea of freedom, the archaic highway system of the Eisenhower era has been woefully insufficient to support the exponential population growth with an increasing number of people in the workforce in a world of unbridled capitalism. The opening of *La La Land* chronicles the experience of being in gridlock traffic as "Another Day of Sun," and though the song itself is inherently hopeful, it exists as a sort of reprieve from the harsh reality that this shared experience on the highway is on a path that is scattered with moments of disappointment and unfulfilled dreams, and even if for many there isn't necessarily success at the end of the road, it doesn't stop the dreamers from soldiering on. While the film generally portrays the idyllic realization of Hollywood aspirations, it also presents a reality where you have to perform in a shitty jazz fusion band with John Legend.

Though we all may be dreamers, the practical reality for most lies in the grind of the day job. As much as the film is a meta commentary on the diegesis of a musical itself, the Japanese musical *Dance with Me* features a self-proclaimed musical hater who finds herself stuck in a musical, where any even remotely melodic tune will cause her to break out in song at inconvenient moments, particularly in the working environment and other public settings. When a song played during a marketing meeting causes her to vault onto the conference table and gallivant all around the office to the ebullient "Happy Valley" or she starts belting to "Neraiuchi" while on a hot date, she is forced to take time off from work to try to resolve her issue before further jeopardizing her promotion cycle. Within this contrived microcosm that is corporate culture, we can lose sight of what actually matters in life in a system that inherently rewards antisocial behavior and morally abhorrent conduct in order to succeed at all costs. In a way the film represents all these latent feelings that tend not to be expressed while trying to function in a rigid hellscape, and as ridiculous as musicals may seem when interpreted literally as part of the diegesis, there's something about them that rings much truer than anything that is actually said, revealing the inner thoughts, *honne*, that are often unexpressed in Japanese culture.

There's a certain trajectory that is charted when considering how work songs in movie musicals have paralleled the evolution of film itself as a medium and the economic concerns of the contemporary period. Expressing how you really feel about work is something of a cultural faux pas, and it's through song that your true thoughts can really come through. Though perhaps at one time people did feel a genuine joy for the work they did and the resulting impact and contribution to the world, and it'd be false to say everyone hates what they do for work all the time, but it's this increasing cynicism over the state of work that despite constant technological advancements, people are constantly working more for less, and the facade begins to fade as there's only a point at which the economic anxiety and frustration that has been swelling up can be hidden before bursting out in the complete expressive mode of song. That isn't to say a sense of wonder is completely gone, but just as the perfectly constructed sets have come down to reveal the gritty reality that is the absolute cesspool that is Hollywood, musicals have come to reflect reality while still celebrating the art form that we all love.

# BIG GIRL, BIGGER HAIR

by Isa Bulnes-Shaw

@mnightslammajam

The 2007 film *Hairspray*, directed by Adam Shankman, based and adapted from the stage musical of the same name is a stand-out gem for plenty of reasons. It's directed by a choreographer. It's based on a John Waters property. It's got John Travolta in full drag with a Baltimore accent thicker than molasses. But no other reason blows down barriers more than its lead, a teenage Tracy portrayed by Nikki Blonsky, and how the film's writing portrays an overweight teenage girl.

Tracy is an extrovert; she immediately befriends the black kids in detention by dancing with them. She's not loud per se, but she's outspoken and confident. She's fashionable, hip, and can dance better than anyone on T.V.. And moreover, she knows it, proclaiming it to the whole city in the film's opening "Good Morning Baltimore". She's determined to be a star and make her dreams come true, and doesn't give up even after being rejected by the station's bigoted manager, Velma Von Tussle. In fact, Tracy is so self-assured that she crashes a live performance soon after to dance for Corny Collins and steals the spotlight, getting added to the cast immediately. When the issue of continued segregation and the elimination of Negro Day on the Corny Collins Show comes to a head, she sets her dream aside to do what is right. "I think people like me are going to have to get up off their fathers laps and get out there and fight for [fairness]," she admits.

Equally significant about the film is what it doesn't show us. When Velma and others rudely expel her from the audition explicitly for the way she looks (and her "communist" views on integration), we don't see her break down. We don't even see her cry, instead cutting straight to her sneaking back into class and looking dejected. She is not fazed by what they said at all, because she has no reason to be ashamed of how she looks. She is disappointed in the outcome, but her feelings about herself don't waver. Instead, she tries again on her terms and succeeds. The most hurt she becomes in the film is when Link says "this adventure is a little too big" for him, which he doesn't mean as it comes off, but Tracy becomes very hurt because it's coming from someone she cares about.

There is nothing wrong with Tracy's weight or anything bad that happens to her because of her size, outside of Velma and Amber, who are shown to be racist bigots anyway. Tracy has zero doubts or reasons to think she might not get the TV spot– after all, she is the best dancer. It's the same reason why she doesn't understand why Link won't look her way in school at the beginning. She can dance way better than Amber!

However, she is certainly not unaware of her size (newsflash: no overweight person is). She and her mom shop at Mr. Pinky's Hefty Hideaway. They both love to eat– they celebrate with ice cream sundaes, and Tracy has a candy bar underneath her pillow at home. But until the heart-to-heart with her father where she says she's "someone who could lose a few pounds" (which is immediately dismissed), Tracy makes no indication to herself or to the audience that she feels she needs to be any other way.

Edna Turnblad is Tracy's opposite; she's a homebody that's afraid to leave the house and of what the neighbors will say since she "hasn't left the house since [she] was a size 10". She sees the world as somewhere that hurts "people like Tracy or girls like [them]". But with the help of Tracy through the song "Welcome to the 60s" and the luscious "Motormouth" Maybelle Stubbs (portrayed by Queen Latifah) through "Big, Blonde and Beautiful", she finally learns to love who she is and not give a damn.

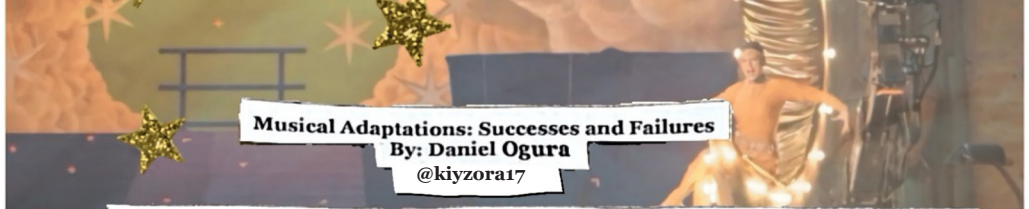
Her mom isn't the only character who Tracy brings the best out of. Link Larkin, the dreamboat crooner everyone loves, has his attention on Tracy the minute he sees her dancing in detention. When they bump into each other, Tracy immediately starts planning their future together in "I Can Hear the Bells". She fantasizes about him asking her out, them getting together, and getting married; Tracy has no doubt that Link will like her back and that they deserve to be a couple til the end, despite what others might say. "Everybody warns that he won't like what he'll see, but I know that he'll look inside of me". Again, she has no reason to think she'd be unworthy of his attention and love.

Link falls in love with Tracy for all the reasons described previously. In "Without Love" the roles are reversed, where he becomes like a teenage girl professing his love to a photo of Tracy, hugging and kissing it. Tracy, an overweight girl, is an object of desire, moreover the desire of a traditionally attractive, popular guy. We even end the film on their long, passionate kiss.

Tracy Turnblad doesn't worry about being too big or taking up space, actually going out of her way to make herself stand out more with short skirts and hair as big as it can be. She makes space for herself, shoving other girls out of the way when she's in a hurry. She is not only comfortable with her body or simply at peace with how she looks, but she loves her body, what it can do, and thinks others should too.

Tracy's portrayal and *Hairspray* are subversive, powerful, and fun in their portrayal of body image and the portrayal of fat bodies. As an overweight 10 year old girl in 2007, I wanted to be Tracy Turnblad when I grew up. Today, I still aspire to be.


*Art by Scarlett Kirn (@punkheart11)*



# Musical Adaptations: Successes and Failures

By: Daniel Ogura
@kiyzora17

Since the introduction of sound to film, there have been a plethora of adaptations of stage musicals onto the silver screen. While some like The Sound of Music become beloved classics, others become the source of endless YouTube criticism videos — don't worry, we'll get into Cats. But what makes an adaptation a success? While hindsight may be 20/20, I'd argue that there's clear telltale signs of when an adaptation will be successful or not.

To understand what makes a film a good adaptation of a stage musical, we must first understand what makes a Broadway musical so special. There are a couple things that we need to understand from the stage: the role of music and song in a musical, the physical theater and staging, and the audience's expectations.

Ever since Rodgers and Hammerstein's "Oklahóma!", the role of music and song in a stage musical has changed. Musicals evolved from just being a show for entertainment, with extended dance scenes and songs for awe and diversion, to being a critical technique for delivering the story and drama of a musical. Musical actors express their emotions through their words and motions. When spoken word is not enough, songs become an outlet to express their inner self. When words are not enough, the body jumps into dance. Music in a musical is and must be the heart of its storytelling prowess. This evolution of the role of songs in musicals led to a particular taxonomy of musical songs. Bob Fosse Songs could be categorized in three types: "I Want" songs - explaining a character's desires, "I Am" songs - explain who a character is, and "New" songs that don't fit the other categories or serve a dramatic function. This implicit splitting of songs enables the viewer of musicals to easily understand the underlying story of a musical in a streamlined manner, whether they are conscious of it or not.

Stage musicals are performed on stages in the physical world. The theater creates a suspended world, where audiences have a change in expectation. Audiences know that there are physical limitations to props and backgrounds, which forces the audience to accept leaps of imagination and world building. They know they have to fill in some of the blanks by themselves. At the same time, theaters create an intimacy between the actors and audience. There is no screen in between, the actors are right there. There's no multiple takes, no cuts or sudden breaks.

When adapting a stage musical for film, directors, cast, and crew must understand these features of musicals in order to have it shine on the silver screen. Sometimes they are successful, and other times, not so much. One of the best ways to understand what is good is by first examining what makes something bad. So let's address the elephant-sized cat in the room – "Cats". I'm going to be honest, I just don't like Cats. The Broadway musical itself never appealed to me, despite all of the commercials on VHS for the 1998 film. But it's not controversial to say that the film adaptation was nothing short of a mess.

"Cats" is the summer Hollywood blockbuster of Broadway musicals. It's just about cats. The story of Cats centers around the Jellicle cats deciding who will die by going to the Heaviside layer. Each cat has an "I Am" song that explains who they are, though never their deeper desires or emotions, except for one – Grizabella, the Glamour Cat, who longs for the days of the past as sung through her climactic "I Want" song, Memory. It's a straightforward musical that builds up for the emotional payoff of "Memory". That's it. There's no protagonist that creates a throughline, nor is there a need for one. There's no complex story – it's a circle jerk to get to "Memory". But it's a highly successful Broadway musical because of that. It's a big production with enjoyable dance spectacles and a song that stays with audiences even after they leave.

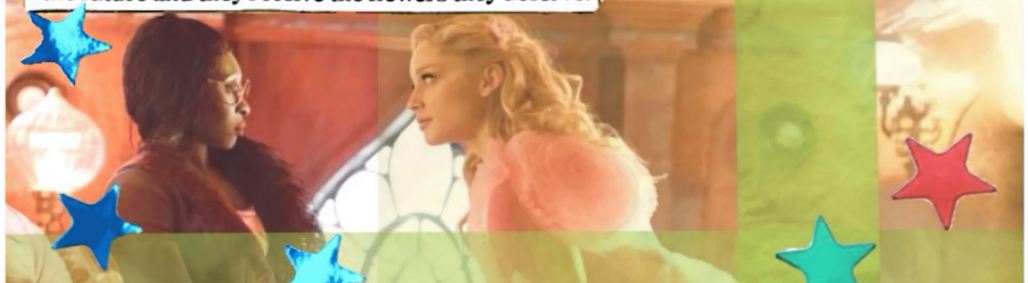
So why did the film adaptation fail so much? While most will remember the uncanny furry CGI and mediocre singing, there are more fundamental issues at play. Hooper decides to establish Victoria as the protagonist of the film, but in doing so, takes away from the pure enjoyable medley of songs with the shallowest of plots and does not make the film any more accessible to the audience while also undermining the only story in the source. Her additional song, Taylor Swift's "Beautiful Ghosts" directly undermines the

main emotional draw of Grizabella, the only character that expresses her desires, and invalidates them. Victoria sings "But at least you have beautiful ghosts". The expanded CGI world has not surpassed the awe from the large set pieces and suspension of reality that audiences experience when visiting the theater. The casting itself is pure stunt casting, with the cast not thinking about the actual source material and characters. Hooper undermines the music by adding in repeated cuts that break up the flow of songs and does not add to the base work and use any of films' strengths.

In contrast, one of the most successful musical adaptations is the recent release of "Wicked Part One". So why does wicked work? The first thing to note is its runtime. "Wicked Part One" has a runtime longer than the entire length of the Broadway musical. And in understanding the extended length, we see one of the reasons why Wicked succeeds as an adaptation. Jon Chu is able to use the extended time in order to take advantage of the film medium. We see extended shots into Oz created by elaborate set design and CGI, showing the world that has to be mostly imagined on stage in vivid color. We see closeups between actors, most notably between Elphaba and Glinda, establishing an emotional depth that is more challenging to do in theater as it is quite hard to see an actor's face when there is physical distance between one's seat and the stage. Chu also did impeccable casting. Cynthia Erivo is a Broadway veteran, most notably for her performance as Celie in The Color Purple. Ariana Grande, while being a pop princess, notably debuted on Broadway in the musical 13. She is also close friends with the original Glinda, Kristin Chenoweth. Both actresses have a profound love and respect for the original work and the characters, and know how to express them in film. The extended length is also only possible as a film. After all, Broadway shows are performed on average eight times a week, and musicals actors are still but humans too. The extension and orchestration of songs, done with the original stage musical composer, Stephen Schwartz add to the emotional narrative. The extended break we see in "Dancing Through Life" does not feel unnatural, nor are the gratuitous cameos of the original actors in "One Short Day".

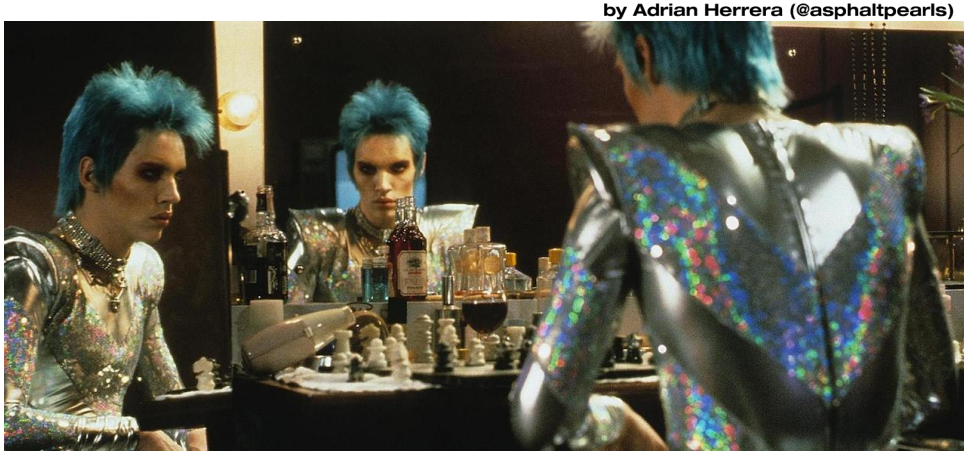
Another successful adaptation is "Mamma Mia!". Here we see an example of what the "Cats" adaptation should have been. While we have stunt casting here as well, the cast is having fun and understands that the source is lighthearted, fun, and doesn't take itself too seriously. "Mamma Mia!", the stage musical is a simple jukebox musical which is remembered for its dance scene spectacles and use of songs that are already familiar to the world at large. The film takes advantage of the real world through its on location filming in Greece. It's a straight adaptation of the source, that enhances it through the audience seeing A-list actors trying their best to sing, and singing with heart – heart that lasted enough to get most of the cast to reappear in the sequel. It's not trying to mess with the source, it wants to bring it to a larger audience.

At the end of the day, perhaps what's most important for an adaptation to be successful isn't unique to Broadway musical adaptations, it's what is essential for any film to be successful in my book: earnestness and heart. The best adaptations know the source material, know what makes it tick, know what made it shine on stage, and are not merely trying to do a cheap replication or money grab, but to breathe in new life to the story, bringing in magic that can only be possible on the silver screen. Whether that be from intricate sets and CGI, from extended scenes, to close ups on the actors and actresses. The best adaptations know not only theater, but they know film. They are special because they are able to bridge two worlds together and create a new one upon itself. They don't shy away from being a musical film, they embrace it. And I hope we continue to have more in the future and they receive the flowers they deserve.



# VELVET MINEFIELD:
## COMPLICATING ARTIST-FAN DYNAMICS

by Adrian Herrera (@asphaltpearls)



The first time I watched *Velvet Goldmine* (1998), Glam Rock was new and exciting to me, and so were the specific ways it blurred gender and sexuality. It was an essential crash course in types of music and ways of being, and it showcased them in vivid, luminous detail. By the end of its runtime, I was just like the fans that form the core of the movie: starstruck, having formed an emotional attachment to a mirage of an icon.

Rewatching the movie as an adult, I'm most struck by how well director Todd Haynes captured the mercurial way fans love things. *Velvet Goldmine* follows a similar structure to *Citizen Kane*: we meet the main subject, Brian Slade, indirectly, through a journalist's interviews with members of his entourage. Slade, a David Bowie stand-in, never speaks for himself, and he remains slippery and unknowable throughout the movie. Our image of him is refracted through the perspectives of his manager, his ex-wife, his collaborator, and his fans, and there's a varnish of bitterness over their memories because of the various ways he's let them down.

The movie ultimately doesn't paint a very flattering picture of this faux-Bowie, which is probably why the man himself didn't allow the use of his music in the soundtrack. Other than that major omission, it's full of glam classics and a few new songs commissioned from 90s bands like Pulp and Shudder to Think.

We first meet Brian Slade as he's about to fake his own assassination during a show, a stunt that would ruin his reputation and career. A time skip takes us ten years ahead to 1984, and Arthur Stuart, an English former fan, is a journalist assigned to write a story on where Slade is now.

As Arthur walks gloomily around New York, reflecting on his misspent youth and how cringe he now finds all that glam rock stuff, he's confronted by the music and visage of a new rock star tailor-made for the eighties: a white-suited man with a big cloud of blond hair who gushes over President Reynolds (presumably this universe's Reagan) during his performance. His videos play on huge public screens, people wear masks of his face on the subway, and his corny stage banter echoes across the wide concrete spaces of the city. His name is Tommy Stone.

Arthur hits the microfiche archives and comes up with a few leads. Through the eyes of Slade's former associates, we watch him rise to stardom, casting off his associates when they outlive their usefulness. He starts out doing Hunky Dory-style art rock, complete with long hair and trailing sleeves, but seeing a pyrotechnic Curt Wild show changes everything for him: he learns the importance of attitude and showmanship. He develops a symbiotic relationship with Curt that mirrors Bowie's close collaboration with Iggy Pop in the 70s, minus the romance that blooms between the characters in the movie.

In the end, Arthur finds Slade not through his usual journalistic tools, but by recognizing Slade's old assistant now working on the Tommy Stone tour. Brian Slade became Tommy Stone, discarding his previous persona once things got too messy. Arthur outs him at a press conference, leaving Stone's PR team to deal with the fallout. Even so, you get the sense that Stone will find a way to sweep it under the rug.

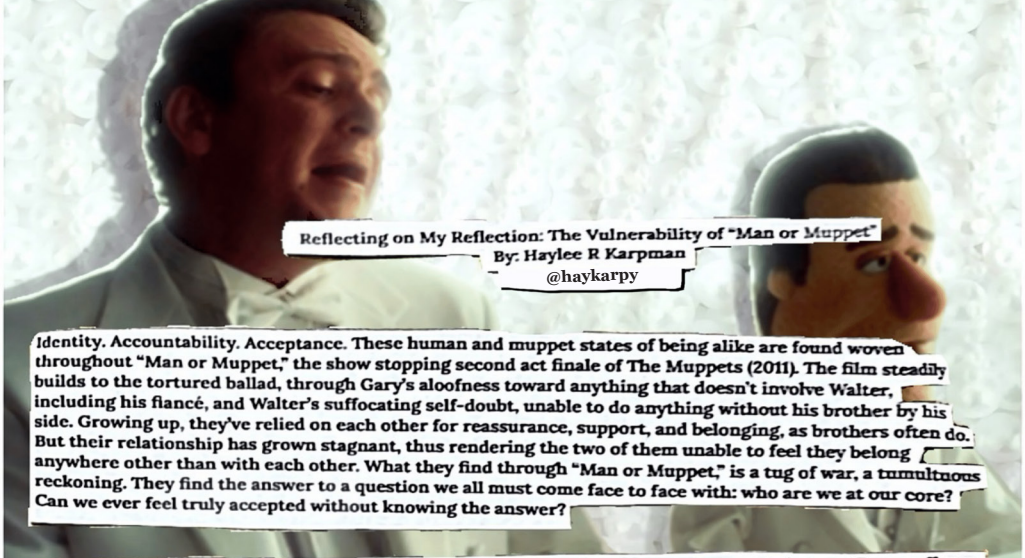
What fascinates me about the movie is how powerfully it conveys a fan's sense of betrayal. Slade's transformation into Stone is framed as an abandonment of queer transgressive aesthetics in favor of more conventional, easier-to-swallow artistry. In the film's narrative, his new music and style and habit of caping for a fictionalized Ronald Reagan are all a craven move to capture the adoration and wallets of a wider audience. It's not a creative evolution, it's an evasion of the truth. Through Arthur's disdain for the Tommy Stone project, Velvet Goldmine condemns "selling out" with a fervor only a movie from the nineties could.

The film is a tribute to the difficult, fraught love fans have for the artists that they turn to at pivotal points of their lives. The idea of a band saving your life is more common and accepted than ever. But the actual people behind the art are fallible humans and prone to disappointing fans. When artists do betray fans' trust, however that manifests, the one-sidedness of the relationship makes resolution and closure tough to obtain.

Arthur does get a form of closure when he runs into Curt Wild at a bar after the Stone show and they recognize each other from a hookup at a gig the decade prior. They consider the wins and losses for glam as a movement: Curt tells him, "We set out to change the world, ended up just changing ourselves." Most crucially, Curt leaves him with an emerald pin that has changed hands between gay artists for decades and was first donned by Oscar Wilde. He slips it into Arthur's beer bottle in secret, and it almost chokes him. Arthur spits out a fizzy mouthful and finds the pin shining among the bubbles.

Between scenes of Slade's escapades, the film shows Arthur spend his teens reckoning with his queerness through music. He watches Brian Slade announce his bisexuality on television and shouts to his parents with uncontrolled joy, "That's me!" There are many scenes of painful awkwardness and the casual cruelty straight society levels at him. Eventually, though, he goes out to gigs, finds his people, and is able to move to London, escaping his homophobic parents. At the end of the day, Arthur is the one who did the work of choosing a life for himself. Brian Slade, and whether or not he was the real thing, doesn't really matter. He was a catalyst: if not Slade, it would have been something else.

Even when the dream of glam is dead, and Brian Slade has slithered out of his skin to become Tommy Stone, Arthur still gets to keep the knowledge and experience he gained through his time as a fan. The music takes on a life of its own.



# Reflecting on My Reflection: The Vulnerability of "Man or Muppet"

By: Haylee R Karpman
@haykarpy

Identity. Accountability. Acceptance. These human and muppet states of being alike are found woven throughout "Man or Muppet," the show stopping second act finale of The Muppets (2011). The film steadily builds to the tortured ballad, through Gary's aloofness toward anything that doesn't involve Walter, including his fiancé, and Walter's suffocating self-doubt, unable to do anything without his brother by his side. Growing up, they've relied on each other for reassurance, support, and belonging, as brothers often do. But their relationship has grown stagnant, thus rendering the two of them unable to feel they belong anywhere other than with each other. What they find through "Man or Muppet," is a tug of war, a tumultuous reckoning. They find the answer to a question we all must come face to face with: who are we at our core? Can we ever feel truly accepted without knowing the answer?

Separated and weary, both Gary and Walter are forced to decide their next steps on their own. Gary wallows in the rain on the streets of Hollywood after Mary leaves him, as he forgot their 10-year anniversary. He lingers past pawn shops illuminated by flickering neon, facing himself in the window. "What's the right direction to go?" He asks himself in song, "I don't know." In a blink, Muppet Gary replaces his reflection. This version of himself challenges Gary. Is this how you see yourself? Is this who you want to be? Maybe it's the part of him that misses having Walter by his side that crafts this apparition, or maybe it's him clinging to his childhood, but Muppet Gary follows Man Gary around Los Angeles through a haunting reflection. As he looks away, he thinks of Mary. He abandoned her, ignored her, left her alone, all on a trip she planned for them just for Gary to invite Walter who ended up being the one garnering all the attention. Gary thinks back on the note Mary left that prompted his turmoil: ...you need to decide. Are you a man... or a muppet? Reality crashes down on Gary as he wonders if even after apologizing, will Mary see him for the man he is and will continue growing to become?

Walter stalls alongside the dust hung in stasis backstage in an old theater. Shame shifts in his felt face as he looks into a smudged mirror. "I look into these eyes," he sings, "And I don't recognize the one I see inside." And there in the mirror enters Man Walter. A physical form of how Walter sometimes hoped he could have appeared as in Smalltown, USA. Now he has a chance to joinThe Muppets, his childhood heroes. But is there anything special about him? Does he have any talent to offer to The Muppets, to help save the studio from being destroyed? Even with The Muppets right in front of him, a group of folks cut from the same cloth, he still struggles with finding confidence in himself, always having looked to Gary for that reassurance. Walter should finally feel like he belongs. Still, he turns to Gary to help him. Brotherly love is one thing, but it's clear the two are holding each other back. By only ever turning to one another for companionship during the highs and the lows, ultimately, they abandon themselves and their potential for growth. Gary was always there to give Walter the encouragement he needed to be himself. Without his brother, Walter is afraid he won't be able to find what he's good at, and without that, how can he ever feel like he belongs with The Muppets? How can he feel like he belongs with anyone?

Both Gary and Walter are confused when they encounter their respective muppet and man counterpart because they know that reflection isn't who they are inside. Their questions of identity echo over the songs emotional climax, and as they appear together with their counterparts, the brothers realize they have both been struggling with moving on and leaving each other. The lives they have wished for are right in front of their eyes, yet still they feel lost. They're afraid if they leave each other, the anchor of who they thought they were will be gone. But Gary knows the man he is, and how much Mary loves him for that. Walter knows the muppet he is, and how the other muppets joyfully accept him without pause. They belt with glee as they accept their next steps, decided by themselves alone, and as Muppet Gary and Man Walter fade away, the brothers buzz in their newfound clarity. In that moment, they both make a promise to hold themselves accountable and find the map within their own hearts.

They sigh, relieved, content, knowing: "That's what I am."

*Meet Me In St. Louis* Art by Haley Thompson @haleytii

# The Frida Zinema

@thefridazinema

thefridacinema.org/zine

The Frida Cinema is a gathering place for movie lovers of all kinds. The lobby is a place of film discussion and friendly gathering, a venue of its own where perspectives from all backgrounds are welcomed and engaged with. We have started the Frida Zinema to replicate this experience in printed form. We welcome all who love film to submit their artwork, writings, and thoughts, and to connect to other artists in a space of creativity and understanding. We love films, and we love people who love films. Please, share your thoughts and artwork, and enjoy the ones within.

Cover art by Jesse Camacho (@candycolorclown)