

The American Musical Stage as a Site of Utopian Possibilities: Subversive Representations of Race and Gender in *Violet* and *Caroline, or Change*

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Abstract

When considering American musicals as social barometers that both reflect and shape the national zeitgeist, two major traditions have been identified: the mid-twentieth-century Golden Age model, which champions the mainstream ideology, and the “anti-musical,” or “counter-mythology,” which challenges the social and aesthetic status quo. The latter, which originated in *West Side Story* (1957) but proliferated in the musicals of Stephen Sondheim, often include outsider characters who challenge the hegemonic structures of racism, sexism, and middle-class privilege. This study draws upon a range of theories from theatre, history, musicology, sociology, critical race theory, feminist theory, religious studies, and cultural studies to investigate how two contemporary musicals – *Violet* (1997), an adaptation of Doris Betts’ short story “The Ugliest Pilgrim,” which tells the story of a disfigured Southern woman’s journey of spiritual healing, and *Caroline, or Change* (2003), an original musical about a middle-aged African American maid, emotionally scarred by racism and sexism, working for a Jewish family in Lake Charles, Louisiana, circa 1963 – function as social documents and in relation to these two traditions in American musical theatre. This study also examines how the works were created, with special attention to the relationship between convention and subversion within the creative process. The study concludes that both female protagonists challenge essentialist cultural representations of race and gender, and both musicals create a site of utopian possibilities within a dystopic social reality.