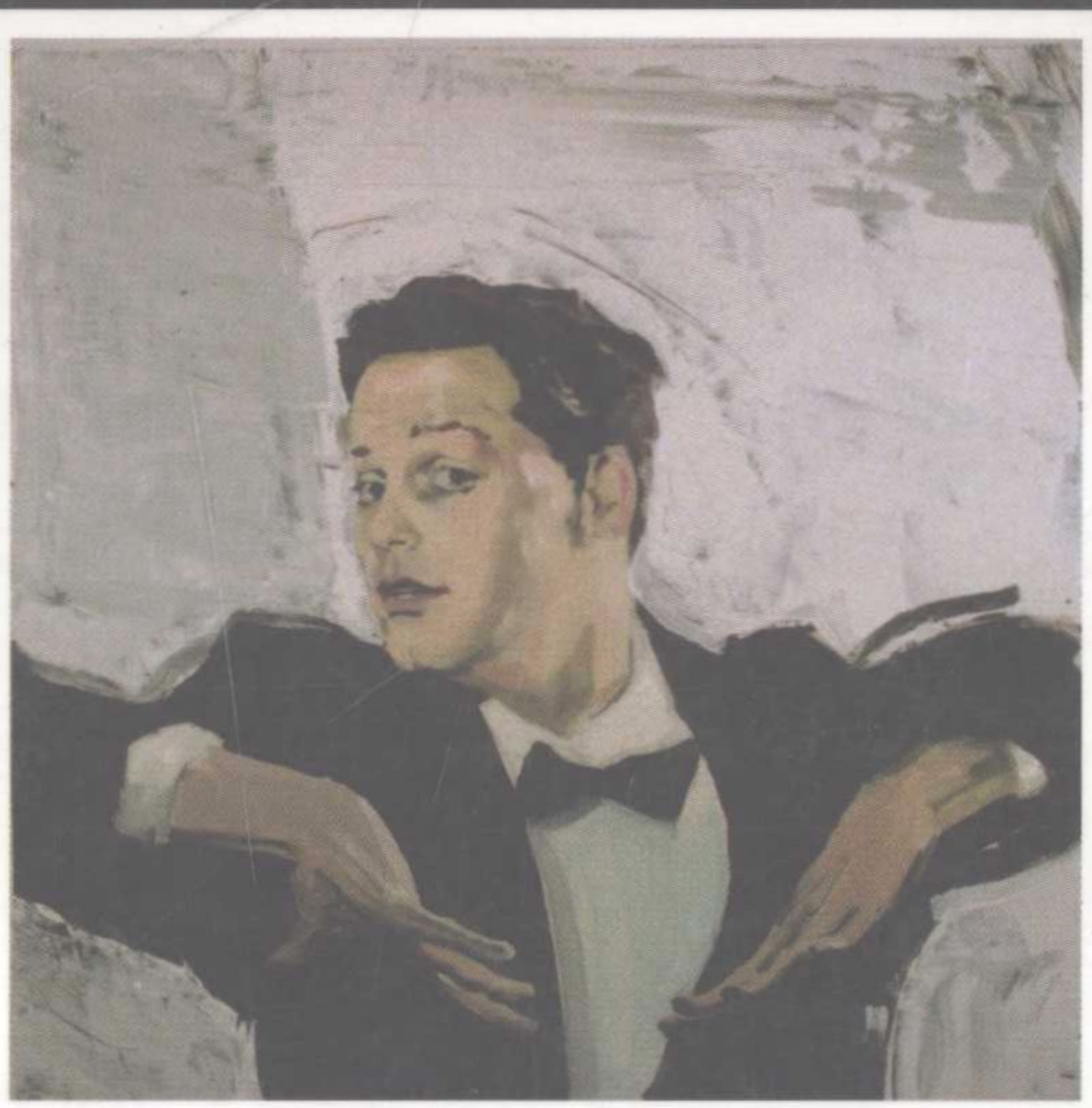
Place for Us



[Essay on the Broadway Musical]

D. A. Miller

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That bad music is played, is sung more often and more passionately than good, is why it has also gradually become more infused with men's dreams and tears. Treat it therefore with respect. Its place, insignificant in the history of art, is immense in the sentimental history of social groups. *PROUST*

Make the most of the music

That is yours. *SONDHEIM*

Contents

In the Basement

Call it dumb, call it clever • Long before its kind was manifestly endangered, the Broadway musical took on a protective coloration. Thanks to the curious discursive exemption that it may have been alone among the forms of our mass culture in enjoying, the musical was already prevented—or perhaps spared—from being an object of serious thought. Its formal description had always been left to the handiwork of technicians and aspiring show doctors, and its history was no more likely to cease being written in playbill-style reminiscences than its sociology was to leave the bush leagues of a boosterism intent on pushing the American way. Yet, as if this general neglect were somehow not enough, at a certain moment—say, in 1943 with *Oklahoma!*—the Broadway musical came to seek misrecognition even in its own limelight, and all the heralded breakthroughs of its so-called golden age consisted in embracing with ever greater rigor the "dramatic model" of a show whose musical numbers, no longer introduced by pretexts as diaphanous as the hosiery on the female chorus line that was losing prominence in the same sea-change, now had to be strictly ration-

alized by the dramatic situation, which they had in turn the all but moral duty to advance. The musical thus let itself be colonized, or camouflaged, by the same narrative naturalism from whose tedium and tyranny its real merit was to keep alive, so long as it was vital itself, the prospect of a liberation. No doubt, we should all have been richer—less stupefied and better entertained—if the reverse procedure had been adopted, and instead of attempting to confer on *Oklahoma!* and its progeny the unremitting dramatic consistency of Clifford Odets or Arthur Miller, one had given to the work of the latter the formal structure of a Broadway musical, and so not only relieved us from its self-important earnestness but elucidated its latent sentimentality as well. But even as matters stood, the stranglehold of the dramatic model only better rehearsed the sense of suffocation that had always underlain the breathless pleasure that the musical, despite its new public relations, hadn't ceased to afford, but that had now acquired, through them, the more intense character of a secret.

Watch my dust • No one better appreciated the secret, or more passionately bore its defining paradoxes, than the kind of boy who, during the '50s, at the height of Broadway's golden age, descended into his parents' basement to practice the following occult ritual. Ensconced in this underworld where he was equally removed from company at home and the lack of it at school, he would pass a tentative hand into the recesses of a small chest; no sooner had he done so than, though New York City was nowhere near, the air suddenly filled with the din of songs from the latest Broadway shows. And his shamanism then began in earnest: to the strident storm thus raised, he would utterly abandon himself, now

tapping furiously away (while in his stocking feet), now belting out a vocal accompaniment (albeit only mouthing the words), now breaking down into sobs (so moved he was by the bravery of his refusal to do so). However persistently his original cast albums had tutored him in the concept of the so-called integrated show, not all his ingrained docility could prevent him from laying claim to a counter-knowledge as defiant as any first act finale, for in the cheerless drama of his life beyond these confines, he too had reasons to want to stop the show, starting here, starting now. What he consequently sought in the Broadway musical was the very thing that those who despised it also found there: not the integration of drama and music found on the thematic surface, but a so much deeper formal discontinuity between the two that no makeshift for reconciling them could ever manage to make the transition from one to the other less abrupt, or more plausible. As often as it had numbers, every Broadway musical brought him ecstatic release from all those well-made plots for whose well-made knots no one who hadn't been a boy scout could possibly have a taste. The bliss was irresistible, for instance, when a team of inept baseball players broke into a song so hearty that it could have drowned out even those catcalls that must have followed had they ever performed it in the vicinity of a real-life diamond—when, in other words, a baseball story got to renounce the ethos of playing ball for that of just playing, or just bawling, like the boy in the basement himself. And so with the genre as a whole: its frankly interruptive mode-shifting had the same miraculous effect on him as on every character, no matter how frustrated in ambition or devastated by a broken heart, who felt a song coming on: that of sending the whole world packing.

Broadway baby • This effect is most copiously distilled in the show tune, that vehement hymn to self-belief which, albeit the least mistakably "Broadway" of Broadway songs, has been branded with the same restricted cultural mobility that every abashed provincial used to pray to the name of Broadway for help in overcoming. For unlike the song whose pretty melody and sweet-tempered lyric, so unobjectionable as to be considered striking, once let it march right

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I'm calm, I'm calm, I'm perfectly calm • "In 1956, if you wanted to play a record on a hi-fi phonograph, you would first set it on a spindle, where it was held in place by a metal arm, and then push a switch to a setting marked 'Reject.' This caused the record to drop onto a turntable while a so-called stylus, attached to an arm of its own, having risen as the record fell, swung to the outer border of the latter's surface, and descended on it; at which point the switch moved of its own accord to another setting marked 'On.' The whole process was so visibly labored, and the various movements of it bore so audibly discontinuous a relation to one another that, even after I had mastered it, I would stand watch over it while it was being accomplished. For though, as the brochure said, these were simple controls that 'even a child can operate,' yet to what was purposeful in the aim of their movements was always added an uncontrollably arbitrary or accidental character of execution, which might miscarry despite the best of intentions. Perhaps I was confusing this willing, but not quite reliable apparatus with the incompetent boy who ran it, and incurred the risk, if it malfunctioned, of getting into trouble, but it did often happen that things went wrong. The concussion of the falling record might dislodge the others stacked above it; and these would collapse onto the stylus arm, which in turn skidded suicidally across the record, damaging it before destroying itself. Or the stylus in descending might miss the record altogether, or miss its surface but not its edge, and be frayed by the record's revolutions. Under such conditions, the music that eventually emerged was particularly wonderful, whatever joy it brought me on its own merits being associated with the relief of, for the time being, not having to worry about the machine."

Zenith

ZENITH HIGH FIDELITY PHONOGRAPH

The BRAHMS Model HFY-17R

Model HFY-17R

out of the theatre into the hit parade, whence, become as old and devalued a standard as a film star working in television, it is now piped into shopping malls the world round, or the song that, possessed of wit as suave as a society escort's, only bared its soul ironically, the better to shield whatever vulgar or awkward importunities would have counted as bad form in the WASP world where, but for this wit, and also by means of it, they rest unexpressed—unlike either of these, the quintessential show tune, celebrate movement or extol the virtues of travel as it may, rarely gets further than the nearest piano bar from its Broadway origins, which in any case it lacks either the good looks or the educable manners to enable anyone to forget. Whenever, having first alloyed the tin of its orchestration, or the brass of its singer's chest voice, it shoves its bumptious way into the opera house, the concert hall, or even the supper club, it suffers humiliations as intimate as those of a body that has suddenly relinquished control of its functions; and even performed to thunderous applause on its own necessarily overprotected stage, it retains something of the contradiction that characterizes a flop in the tension of a spectacle that, despite being fully intended as such, is capable of embarrassing its spectators as profoundly as if they were witnessing a scene from which propriety demanded they avert their eyes.

Our leaders are cheerful • Its appointed mission—to deliver whoever sings it from disaster and dejection, from resentment, self-pity, and various other unconsoled relations to want—ought to make the show tune thoroughly at home in a society where, by means of a doctrine of "personal responsibility," authority likes to entertain the impossible dream of a population with nothing to

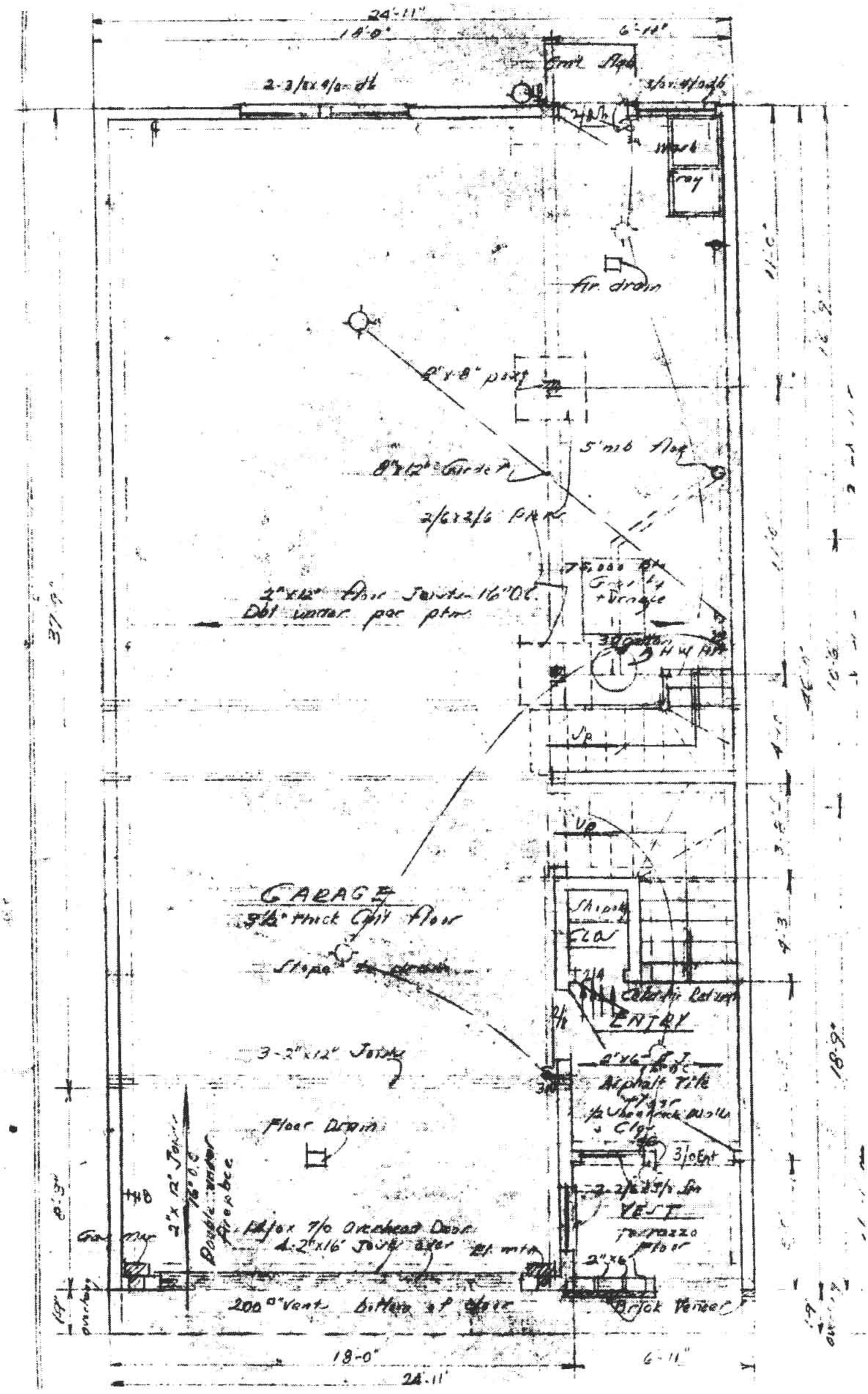
complain about. For however manifold the misfortune, or complete the catastrophe by which I am overtaken, my stout rendition of the show tune entails my not having to suffer any of its consequences, psychic or otherwise. What matter if the external world tenders no better motive for my ascension over its wreck than that it has supplied the *prima materia* from which I may compose a small posy of my favorite things, when the real point of treating, say, poverty through exposure to the sun in the morning and the moon at night, or depression with, of all things, a little Christmas, is to exalt the performative power of a personal will that, even on such manifestly worthless external supports, remains potent enough to defy the hard-knock life by the simple decision to do so? But no amount of heart will keep the Senators' luck from batting zero—only the devil can do that—and on Fanny Brice's decree that nobody rain on her parade, there follows but more stormy weather. The elation of ego worked by the show tune is not just *voluntary,* having its source and sustenance nowhere outside a subject who pulls himself up by the tongue on his tap shoes, but also *vacuous,* too exhausted by the violence of affirmation to acquire any objective reality beyond its own thus belittled grand gesture. In the example that is most alert to this aspect of the genre, there is no longer even a nominal difference between the initial formulation of disaster ("They think that we're through . . .") and the terminal one of triumph (". . . and nothing's gonna stop us till we're through"), as though Rose unconsciously shared Sondheim's understanding that the true content of show-tune transcendence is simply the strength to endure a depressive status quo. That show tunes often ground this transcendence in some aspect of the mere act of performing them (whistling a happy tune, tapping your troubles away) exposes

the all but otherworldly asylum where the subject they rescue survives: in no business but show business. Accordingly, loudly brayed independence proves indentured to the public relations of an individualism that is indifferent and even antipathetic to sponsoring the process, or legitimizing the effects, of actual individuation. In the act of dismissing the world, the subject has so thoroughly accepted his own dismissal as an agent in it, that the exhilarated spectacle he presents of being "alive" is hardly distinguishable from a memorial service conceded to him by the social order that, having just taken him out of action, pays pious homage to his defunct vitality, the better to claim, when it resumes its regular business, that it is doing so in the very spirit of the deceased, who with his other great merits also happens to be the sort of person who would have wanted one to "go on living": that is, to forget him.

They smile when they are low • Yet the show tune rhetoric of denial is too brittle not to crack, and not to unmask through the fissures the would-be invulnerable subject put to pasture in its Elysian fields. The latter in fact has only been constituted to conceal—or rather, by concealing badly, to disclose—a radically pathetic subject, who by letting us see that he is trying to hide his sufferings, becomes additionally so. By a ruse as lubberly as the adolescents whom the Broadway musical makes short work of recruiting to the rank of its followers, his self-belief solicits our incredulity, and his no less amazing self-sufficiency our support. "I am what I am, and what I am needs no excuses," but this Yahweh-like claim gets retracted in every subsequent line of Albin's apologia, which does nothing but badger and cajole the others he professes not to need

("*So what* if I love each feather and each spangle? *Why not* try to see things from a different angle?"), so as to extort from them the ovation that, by the time his consummate theatrical sense has inspired him to rip off his wig, fling it in Georges's face, and storm off the stage, down the aisle, and out of the theatre, there is no longer any doubt how much he prefers to the hook. All that the show tune finally achieves by its boisterous denial of suffering, therefore, is a certain vulgar "tact" in the latter's otherwise forbidden display. From this incipient breakdown of stoicism—a breakdown that threatens to spread via the mechanism of identification from the singer to his audience—stems the widespread cultural embarrassment with which Broadway music covers the ill-bred reluctance of personal need to become abstinence.

Sweetheart, they're suspecting things • Hence, only one thing is as common at the performance of a show tune as the fact that grown men and women surreptitiously take it on themselves to release the sobs they hear the performer stifling between the upbeats: namely, the fact that with far less inhibition, the same people celebrate the end of this disturbance with an ovation whose warmth they imagine to meet, not to say muzzle, her demand, and whose vigor persuasively shakes off whatever mollification the flow of those tears may have effected in their bodies. In a similar spirit of self-protection, on the nights of his civic light opera subscription, a certain style *père de famille* of the period used to rely on exhaustion and old-fashioneds to put himself into a torpor that would so completely keep him from knowing what was happening to him that nothing could happen; and his wife would only play the album


24'-11"
18'-0"
6'-11"
Front Step
2-3/8x 9/0 - dl
Fir drain
2"x8" Joist
5'mb Step
2"x12" Joist 16"OC.
Dbl Header per plan
GARAGE
5½" thick Conc Floor
Slope to drain
3-2"x12" Joists
Floor Drain
2"x12" Joists 16" O.C.
Double Header Over bce
Air box 7/o Overhead Door
4-2"x16" Joists after 21' min
200 sq" Vent
Bitum at Base
Conc Step
Shlock
Flor
Cellar Air Return
ENTRY
2"x6" Joists 16" O.C.
Asphalt Tile
½" Plywood Subfl
on C19"
3/0 Ent
2-2/8 2-5/8 Sh
VEST
Terrazzo Floor
2"x6"
Brick Veneer
18'-0"
6'-11"
24'-11"

of *My Fair Lady* when he was out of the house. Nor was their son ever so overwhelmed by his passion that he forgot to manage the secrecy in which he indulged it, or if he did, if once when having moved his basement upstairs he was by some chance distracted enough to omit to draw the curtains on his performance, so that other boys in the neighborhood had been able to catch him in the act of vibrating sympathetically to the numbers that neither he nor they had ever seen, he soon understood—that is to say, too late—that his sense of embarrassment had been given to him, like the gag reflex in his throat, to warn against the social humiliation that must ensue if he were such a cockeyed optimist as not to heed it. (In the Alcatraz Island penitentiary, the prisoners' block was divided by a corridor from either side of which the new arrivals being escorted to their cells would be taunted and jeered at by those already incarcerated; this avenue of indignity bore the name "Broadway.")

Life down a hole • The archaeology of the post-war gay male subject regularly turns up a cache of original cast albums. These were used, scholars now believe, in a puberty rite that, though it was conducted by single individuals in secrecy and shame, was nonetheless so widely diffused as to remain, for several generations, as practically normative for gay men, as it was almost unknown among straight ones. The boys destined, as it was said, to be *musical,* would descend into the *basement* of their parents' home (see *Figure* left), and there they would sing and dance to recorded Broadway music (in one variant, merely mime singing and dancing) under the magical belief that, having lent the score the depth of their own abjection, they might then borrow all its fantastic hope that their solitary condition would end in glory and triumph. In contradistinction to other puberty rites, including their own, the only body fluids to pour forth in this one—but they did so copiously, orgiastically—were tears.

Another opening, another show • Hence, too, it is by no means true that, as someone says in *Applause,* "nobody loves a flop." The serious devotee of the Broadway musical has always been as much drawn to flops as to hits, barely bothering, perhaps barely able, to distinguish between them, as though his having a taste for the genre precluded his having any taste in it, and the detailed exposure required to make him a connoisseur had only succeeded in making him indiscriminate. Nor may this addiction to flops be convincingly put down to the savagery of enjoying seeing people fail. Such sadism merely belatedly encrusts, as a show tune does the suffering that no one is interested in hearing, his excruciated sense that these flops have spoken the truth of the Broadway musical, that for which he had originally cathected it, when, in the basement, as soon as he read the reviews, he took flops to his bosom with the same excessive affection that Louise showed one of her pets in *Gypsy,* no doubt sharing his opinion that, in this great show, "Little Lamb" was the only dog. Against all the odds of its oddness, he would root for a doomed show by making a daily tally of its consecutive performances till their total should at least have spared it extreme disgrace; and after it closed, he would no less superstitiously seek to keep it alive by playing to death its score, almost as though he were himself the bad idea, unworkable from the start, that, in the intolerable verdict of retro-analysis, no one or nothing could have saved.

I've got your number • Today, though, it has become part of the salesman's job to make you ashamed of asking for something so strange, old-fashioned, even indecent, as not to be part of his stock. In the satisfied tone with which he informs us, "I'm afraid we've