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“T’morra, T’morra”:  
The 1940s Broadway Period Musical and  
Progressive Nostalgia in *Bloomer Girl*

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*Billed as a “Modern Musical Comedy with Old-Fashioned Charm,” the Civil War-set Bloomer Girl (1944) followed Oklahoma! as part of a World War II-era cycle of Broadway musicals steeped in period Americana. This article argues that Bloomer Girl—connecting first-wave feminism to Rosie the Riveter, and the abolitionist movement with civil rights—offered a complex vision of progressive nostalgia, advancing utopian aims of social justice that anticipate Finian’s Rainbow.*

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While Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma!* legendarily changed the course of American musical theater through the historical canonization of the “integrated musical play,” the 1943 musical also had more immediate effects in the commercial arena of the Broadway musical. The monumental hit status of *Oklahoma!* launched a substantial World War II-era cycle of Broadway musical plays steeped in folkloric visions of the American past: what critic Louis Kronenberger predicted in 1944 as “a vogue, a cycle, perhaps an orgy of costume pieces.” Indeed, by the time the 1910s-set musical comedy *High Button Shoes* opened in October of 1947, following such shows as *Carousel* (1945), *Up in Central Park* (1945), and *Brigadoon* (1947), George Jean Nathan observed, “In the last five seasons, twenty-

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seven of the musical exhibits, including revivals, have dealt with past and hypothetically nostalgic years. This is the twenty-eighth" (95).

Among the earliest musicals of this wartime nostalgia wave was 1944's *Bloomer Girl*, with music by Harold Arlen, lyrics by E. Y. "Yip" Harburg (who also directed the show, as produced by John C. Wilson), and a book by Sig Herzig and Fred Saidy. Set in Cicero Falls, NY, just before the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, this fictionalized historical musical recounts how budding activist Evelina Appelgate joins her firebrand aunt—the dress reform crusader Dolly Bloomer (based loosely on Amelia Jenks Bloomer)—in fighting the interwoven battles for women's rights and the abolition of slavery. Produced and marketed as something of a follow-up to *Oklahoma!*, *Bloomer Girl* shared much of the pedigree and personnel of the former show, including choreographer Agnes de Mille (who created the show's legendary "Civil War Ballet"), as well as featured players Celeste Holm (in the lead role of Evelina) and Joan McCracken (as maid-turned-suffragette Daisy), orchestrator Robert Russell Bennett, set designer Lemuel Ayers, and costume designer Miles White.

Billed as "a modern musical comedy with old-fashioned charm," *Bloomer Girl* earned favorable comparison to the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical (as well as Hammerstein's earlier *Show Boat*, 1927), and praise from critics as a "fresh, vigorous, radiant, enchanting and thoroughly American" show, as described by Jim O'Connor of the *Journal American* (qtd. in Suskin 90–91). Although several critics, such as John Chapman, found Herzig and Saidy's libretto overlong and marred by a "lack of pace," the majority of reviewers lauded Arlen's idiomatic folk and American spiritual-inflected melodies, Harburg's "deft, adult lyrics" (Field), Ayers's "warm and wistfully humorous" sets, and costumes by White that "caught a period of Americana with a captivating blend of warmth, nostalgia and humor," as described by Edwin H. Schloss of the *Philadelphia Record*. At the same time, these qualities incited critical backlash from the *New York Post*'s Wilella Waldorf: "The fabulous success of *Oklahoma!* was bound to have its effect on the Broadway musical market. Let's face it. We are in for several seasons of intensely old-fashioned quaintness, most of it with choreography by Agnes de Mille" (qtd. in Suskin 92). On the heels of a prodigious advance sale, as well as its accolades, *Bloomer Girl*—which opened at the Shubert Theatre on 5 October 1944—ran for a solid 657 performances.

Yet while *Bloomer Girl* can be categorized as a period musical, the show's engagement with nostalgia is more complicated than critics like Waldorf suggested. *Bloomer Girl* used a picturesque period setting less toward the sentimental evocation of a simpler time, than toward the liberal aims and human rights activism of Harburg and his collaborators. Whereas

*Oklahoma!* portrayed the turn-of-the-century American prairie as a site of emerging statehood and communal cohesion, while allegorizing the uniting of a divided America during World War II, *Bloomer Girl* focused on threats to democracy within the United States itself. Rooted in New Deal liberalism, *Bloomer Girl* drew strong parallels between social struggles in 1861 and current 1944 conditions of racial discrimination and Jim Crow laws, while also making powerful statements about women's rights: connecting the skirted pantaloons of Amelia Bloomer and the trousers of Rosie the Riveter. As a *New York Times* preview of the show noted, "But, say the show's enthusiasts, in spite of its 1861 setting, *Bloomer Girl* will be very timely. For, it's said, problems that are bothering Americans then are bothering them now" ("New Musical"). Offering what theater critic John Rosenfield called an "amalgam of liberal propaganda and Americana" (Rosenfield), and combining "nostalgic gaiety with soberly intelligent treatment of abolition and racial equality" ("*Bloomer Girl*," *Pic Magazine*), *Bloomer Girl* presented a vision of progressive nostalgia, with utopian themes anticipating *Finian's Rainbow*, Harburg's masterful 1947 musical satire advocating civil rights.

### Nostalgia and Utopianism in the Broadway Musical

The period musicals of the 1940s stemmed both from the context of World War II, and from a nostalgic impulse that runs throughout the history of the Broadway musical. Coined by Swiss physician Johannes Hofer in the seventeenth century as an affliction troubling homesick soldiers, "nostalgia" (from *nostos*, "return home," and *algia*, "longing") came to signify "a longing for a home that no longer existed or has never existed" (Boym xiii). As Rebecca Ann Rugg observes: "Nostalgia is the prime dramaturgical mode of musical theater. It steers not only the course of audience response and show structure but also marketing strategies, the critical machine, and the settings of the productions themselves" (45). Steeped in "nostalgic memories of performances, tropes and icons past" (Edney 35), the Broadway musical's backward-looking impulses have also frequently merged with what Richard Dyer described as entertainment's "utopian sensibility" (27), locating intuitions of "something better to escape into" (20) amid portrayals of America's past.<sup>1</sup>

While nostalgia musicals have pervaded the history of the Broadway musical, certain historical periods—including years of wartime—have tended to intensify their frequency of production.<sup>2</sup> As Svetlana Boym notes, "as . . . a longing for continuity in a fragmented world, nostalgia inevitably reappears as a defense mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythm of life and historical upheaval" (xiv). During World War II, the nostalgia musical served similar functions of comfort and reassurance, while reminding audi-

ences of the democratic American values for which soldiers were fighting overseas. Alan Jay Lerner recalled of the *Oklahoma!* era, “As the depression had killed the sentimental musical and squirted adrenalin into the veins of satire, World War II killed satire and revived the sentimental musical. The mood of the country switched like a traffic light to escapism, nostalgia and fantasy” (42).

Many Broadway musicals, including those of the World War II era, align with one of the two types of nostalgia as influentially defined by Boym (xviii). “Restorative nostalgia” earnestly seeks a return to lost origins and homeland, as in Lerner and Loewe’s own *Brigadoon* (1947), which evoked a lost, pre-industrial Shangri-La in its fantasy Scottish moors. By contrast, “reflective nostalgia”—a mode exemplified by Sondheim and Goldman’s *Follies* (1971)—draws critically upon irony and humor to reflect upon the distance between past and present (and thus is not incompatible with another frequent mode of the Broadway musical: camp).

Beyond this binary, nostalgia can also function to channel visions of social transformation, as demonstrated in *Bloomer Girl*. Emily Keightley and Michael Pickering observe that “nostalgia should be seen as accommodating progressive, even utopian impulses as well as regressive stances and melancholic attitudes” (11). Similarly, the art historian Therese Lichtenstein elaborates upon Walter Benjamin’s theories that “a critical, progressive nostalgia would use the past in a dialectal way—to change and illuminate present conditions and both individual and class consciousness in a way that might lead to political action and social change” (217). Created, produced and marketed in the mainstream context of Broadway musical entertainment, and consumed predominately by white, middle-class audiences, *Bloomer Girl* did not promote a specifically radical or Marxist agenda. At the same time, Harburg and his collaborator steeped their period musical in liberal goals and ideals that reached a wide audience during the show’s original Broadway run, as well as a 1946–47 national tour. As Stuart Hecht notes of the Broadway musical’s “ostensibly conservative” form, and its paradoxical ability “to influence social change”:

[The musical’s] very conservative nature granted it special privilege with mainstream audiences. Because it usually shunned controversy, when a Broadway show did include controversial subject matter, that subject tended to find more ready acceptance (6).

Harburg later recounted of his 1944 hit, “In *Bloomer Girl* . . . we showed that the women’s movement was part of an indivisible fight for equality. Equality cannot be divided” (Alonso 128). As the director and lyricist of *Bloomer Girl*, Harburg led the musical’s team in creating a strong critical

conversation between American history and issues of civil rights and women’s rights in the then-present moment of 1944.

### History and Human Rights in *Bloomer Girl*

*Bloomer Girl* presented a heavily fictionalized portrayal of Amelia Jenks Bloomer’s battles and campaigns in Civil War-era America. As recounted by Harburg, *Bloomer Girl* originated with an idea (and, then, unproduced play) by costume designer Lilith James and her husband Dan James. The former had shared with Harburg her fascination with antebellum fashion and her research into the life of Bloomer, who urged the replacement of the cumbersome hoop skirt with the freer bloomer costume (which, as invented not by Bloomer, but by Elizabeth Smith Miller, “consisted of loose, Turkish-style trousers gathered by the ankles and covered by a dress that usually reached somewhere between the knee and the mid-calf”; Alonso 123). In the early 1850s, Bloomer promoted women’s rights and dress reform, as well as abolitionism and temperance, in her suffragette newspaper *The Lily*, published in Seneca Falls, New York (represented as “Cicero Falls” in *Bloomer Girl*). Along with approximately three hundred women’s rights activists and abolitionists (including Frederick Douglass), Bloomer had been among the original attendants of the historic 1848 Seneca Falls Convention, as organized by Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and credited by many feminist historians as the foundational event of American feminism (a movement that stemmed from women’s involvement in anti-slavery associations since the 1830s).

*Bloomer Girl*’s creators took numerous artistic licenses in transforming American history into their modern musical comedy with old-fashioned charm. They portrayed Amelia as “Dolly Bloomer” (a role originated by Margaret Douglass), while devising a fictional niece for Dolly as the romantic heroine of the show. The sixth and youngest daughter of hoop skirt manufacturer Horatio Applegate, the rebellious Evelina (Celeste Holm) dreams of transforming the status quo, and teams up against her “hoop king” father with her dynamic “bloomer queen” aunt. Joining her aunt as a writer for *The Lily*, Evelina finds her activist commitment challenged when she falls in love with Kentucky salesman Jefferson Calhoun (David Brooks), with whom Horatio plans an arranged marriage for business purposes. Though Jefferson himself questions the institution of slavery, his brother Hamilton comes to Cicero Falls claiming ownership of the runaway slave Pompey (Dooley Wilson), who, joining fellow runaways Alexander (Richard Huey) and Augustus (Hubert Dilworth), has sought shelter and escape with Dolly Bloomer through the latter’s participation in the Underground Railroad. Yet, at the same time that Jefferson challenges his own views on slavery, he also learns to question his tradi-

tional views on feminine domesticity, and to eventually embrace the human rights causes of Dolly and Evelina.

In its opening scene, *Bloomer Girl* set up immediate parallels between the Civil War and World War II eras. *Bloomer Girl* opens in 1861 on a “tranquil domestic scene” (1–1–4)<sup>3</sup> in Cicero Falls, as Evelina’s five sisters knit and wait for their husbands—all hoop skirt salesmen—to return to them from the road. The sisters harmonize on “When the Boys Come Home” (a song reprised poignantly in the final scene of *Bloomer Girl*, when the Applegate sisters’ husbands enlist in the Civil War as Union soldiers):

Stitch, stitch, pray and sleep,  
Men must work and women must weep.  
T’was ever thus since time began;  
Woman oh woman must wait for man.

Contrasting Evelina with her sedate sisters and mother Serena, *Bloomer Girl* introduces the former as a brash and assertive young woman, who, when she first appears, is portrayed defiantly reading her father’s newspapers instead of genteel magazines like *Godey’s Lady’s Book*. “War clouds gathering” (1–1–6), Evelina reads soberly from *The Gazette*, while entering into political arguments with her conservative father that clearly suggested parallels between the liberalism of Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Delano Roosevelt:

HORATIO. . . Do you realize that rail-splitter had saddled us with a national debt of sixty million? . . .

EVELINA. Aunt Dolly says that the President is more concerned with the public welfare than the public debt. (1–1–7)

In its portrayal of “women running around in pants” (1–5–62), *Bloomer Girl* suggested both Dolly and Evelina as nineteenth-century predecessors to Rosie the Riveter, as thousands of women during World War II traded dresses for slacks and trousers as they assumed jobs in factories, offices, and in military reserve units like the WACs and WAVES. “In place of a life hemmed in by a hoop skirt, I’m offering Evelina the broad horizon in bloomers,” announces Dolly (1–1–13), who has enlisted Evelina to help her run *The Lily* (which she and “the bloomer girls” have resorted to publishing from a bordello-turned-office). Evelina becomes increasingly committed to the joint causes of the anti-slavery movement and women’s rights, as Evelina, to Harburg’s clever lyrics, leads her fellow suffragettes in the anthem: “It Was Good Enough for Grandma (But It’s Not Good Enough for Us)”:

When Granny was a lassie,  
That tyrant known as man  
Thought woman’s place was just the space  
Around a frying pan.  
He made the world his oyster,  
Now it ain’t worth a cuss.  
This oyster he can’t foister on us. . . .

Our brains against his muscle,  
Our tea against his rum.  
Look behind the bustle  
For the shape of things to come. (1–3–37)

Forbidden by her father to wear her aunt’s bloomers, Evelina cunningly agrees to model “The Applegate Super Hoop of 1861” in Horatio’s fashion show of his company’s newest models. At the close of this number, “Pretty as a Picture,” Evelina “drop[s] her hoop skirt to reveal a pair of bloomers underneath” (1–5–66).

Offering *Bloomer Girl*’s audiences the mediation of a more temperate women’s rights advocate, the musical depicted a third feminist character in the form of Evelina’s maid Daisy, who becomes increasingly committed to working at *The Lily*. Originally played by Joan McCracken (a prominent featured dancer in *Oklahoma!*), Daisy both thematically reinforces and comically questions *Bloomer Girl*’s utopian rhetoric. Concerned that she might lose her boyfriend, a fellow servant named Gus, while fighting for feminism and civil rights, Daisy exclaims, “What’s the use of being a liberal if you can’t give anything away?” (1–4–55). Daisy launches into the comic number “T’Morra, T’Morra”—a number resembling *Oklahoma!*’s “I Cain’t Say No.” Performed as a comic “striptease in the spirit of 1861,” and as a sexy showstopper for *Bloomer Girl*’s featured soubrette, “T’Morra, T’Morra” featured McCracken dancing out of her hoop skirt into her corset and pantaloons (“*Bloomer Girl*,” *New York Times*). Harburg’s lyrics offered a light-hearted take on the paradox of progressivism, as Daisy sings in frustration:

The present, the present, the present is so pleasant.  
What am I savin’ it for?  
Progressive, progressive,  
I’d rather be caressive,  
My heart is raisin’ a row.  
Utopia, utopia,  
Don’t be a dope, ya dope ya,  
Get your utopia now! (1–4–56)

Using elements of satire, as well as liberal sentiment, *Bloomer Girl* exuberantly celebrated women's liberation in the work force and as active participants in American society. When Dolly cries to her army of suffragettes, "We're at war already, aren't we girls?," the bloomer girls respond, "We're on the march," "It's a fight to the finish," "And this is our battle dress!" (1-3-36). Dialogue in the show alluded to the many professional and political achievements of women since the Civil War era. When Horatio reacts in dismay to Dolly's suggestion that someday there will be a "woman horse-car conductor," Dolly and Evalina continue the litany: "Someday there'll be women lawyers too . . . and women scientists . . . and women newspapermen . . . and women congressmen." To this, Horatio replies, "Women congressmen! God forbid!" (1-1-14).

Yet, in a 1944 America in which only a small number of women served in Congress,<sup>4</sup> *Bloomer Girl* also portrayed women's struggle for equality as a continuing battle, with themes and conflicts that would have resonated with women in wartime. On one level, *Bloomer Girl* portrayed the despair of wives waiting for boyfriends and husbands to return safely from the European front. In de Mille's lamenting Civil War Ballet, the choreographer "used dance and gesture to express the anxieties of women waiting peacefully for the return of the soldiers" (Sargolla 103), only for one of the women to receive news that her husband has been killed in battle. At the same time, *Bloomer Girl* captured the tensions of women holding traditionally male jobs during wartime. While Hollywood and media propaganda enlisted women to join the labor force and military reserves as part of the war effort, it also reinforced the temporary nature of women's mobilization: that they were expected to return to their proper domestic roles "when the boys come home" (Lingeman 140).

Anticipating such post-war Broadway musicals as *Annie Get Your Gun* (1946) and *Kiss Me, Kate* (1948), *Bloomer Girl* evokes conflicts of professional ambition versus traditional feminine propriety. Evelina confronts Jeff's initial disapproval at her political activism as a suffragette and abolitionist, as the latter lectures her, "Such pretty lips should discuss something prettier than politics" (1-5-62). In the second act, Evelina and Dolly are arrested for "violating the Sabbath, masquerading as men, and advertising *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—a lewd, indecent and seditious exhibition" (2-1-6). In prison, Evelina confides to her aunt about the difficulty of choosing between her work and Jeff:

EVALINA. There are so many more important things [than love], Aunt Dolly. Can you imagine Joan of Arc saving France—if she'd had a husband and five children? Oh, Aunt Dolly! (*And then suddenly all the bravery melts away as she is a little girl again crying in DOLLY's arms.*)

DOLLY. Go ahead, dear, I understand. . . . You forget that I was a young girl once myself—about a hundred years ago. I scared away my young man with the scandalous announcement that I wanted to go to college! (2-2-18)

Ultimately, it is the same "young man" of Dolly Bloomer—now the Governor of New York—who arranges Dolly and Evelina's release from prison, as a favor to the woman he still loves. The Governor announces, "And I still haven't given up hope of making Miss Bloomer the Governor's Lady," as Dolly retorts, "Governor's Lady, hell—I'm going to be Governor!" (2-4-33).

To at least one theater critic, such dialogue conjured not only the historical icon of Amelia Bloomer, but contemporary female political figures. As a critic for *Rob Wagner's Script* observed, "The dialogue [in *Bloomer Girl*], too, is so topical that one could read politics of 1944 into 1861—government interference with business, expanding national debt, and that lady in the White House" ("New York Notes"). In the latter role, Eleanor Roosevelt held powerful visibility alongside her husband, as the most politically active First Lady up to that time, as well as a passionate defender of human rights. Defying the Daughters of the American Revolution's boycott of Marian Anderson performing in Constitution Hall, Roosevelt famously arranged for the soprano to sing at the Lincoln Memorial in 1939, among numerous other contributions to the early civil rights movement.<sup>5</sup> Both Dolly and Evelina, in *Bloomer Girl*, resonated with the figure of Eleanor Roosevelt, while representing the feminist abolitionists of the mid-nineteenth century.

*Bloomer Girl* juxtaposes the bondage of Victorian "true womanhood" with the institution of American slavery. *Bloomer Girl's* narrative is tightly focused around ethical dilemmas related to Dolly and Evelina's abolitionism. Like Evelina, Jeff at heart disapproves of slavery, though he is socially conditioned to it by his Southern upbringing. Jeff is able to temporarily liberate Pompey by transferring his ownership to Evelina, who promptly grants him his freedom. Yet when Hamilton attempts to reclaim Pompey as "family property" (2-2-16), Jeff weakens and considers capitulating. Evelina angrily reprimands him, before breaking off the romance, "You can't be a coy liberal one moment and a smug Tory the next" (1-5-62). By the end of the show, Pompey is promised his freedom (and escape to Canada), as the country erupts into Civil War. Ironically, the announcement of war takes place during Evelina and Dolly's protest performance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (a sequence anticipating the more famous "Small House of Uncle Thomas" in Rodgers and Hammerstein's 1951 *The King and I*). The announcement of war also halts the near-arrest of Pompey, who is appearing as Uncle Tom.

As a racially integrated musical that drew critical comparisons to not only *Oklahoma!*, but to Hammerstein's earlier *Show Boat* (1927), *Bloomer Girl* offered roles for African-American actors that were both narratively and musically prominent. According to numerous reviews, Dooley Wilson, as Pompey, and Richard Huey, as Alexander, regularly stopped the show in their respective performances of the songs "The Eagle and Me" and "I Got a Song." While *Bloomer Girl* produced bigger mainstream radio hits—such as the romantic duets "Right as the Rain" and "Evelina"—Wilson and Huey's respective numbers received extensive coverage and admiration by critics. While Rowland Field of the *Newark Evening News* called "The Eagle and Me" "just about the most exciting song I ever heard on a New York stage," Arthur Pollock of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* noted of "I Got a Song," "That number could go on all night if the management would permit; everyone else is willing."

As a major supporting character in *Bloomer Girl*, Wilson's Pompey was depicted as witty, intelligent, and committed to the ideal of freedom, at a time in which minstrel-inflected stereotypes still appeared on the Broadway stage. By the standards of its time, *Bloomer Girl*'s portrayal of its African-American characters drew praise from the black press. The *Baltimore Afro-American*'s critic observed in 1945: "Going into its second year, *Bloomer Girl*, a musical comedy, has almost escaped the notice of the colored press in spite of the significance of the play and three topnotch colored performers. . . . Dooley Wilson, who was skyrocketed to fame in the film *Casablanca*, singing 'As Time Goes By,' has a more significant role in this play." Although *Bloomer Girl* depicted Pompey performing the subservient title role during the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* sequence, the same critic continued that the character bypassed such stereotypes: "[Wilson plays] a slave who has been 'railroaded' to freedom and without the Uncle Tomisms usually found in such character delineations" ("Three Colored Stars"). Abe Hill of the *New York Amsterdam News* described *Bloomer Girl* as one of a number of mixed-cast new plays and musicals in the 1943–44 Broadway theater season that "portray the Negro without necessarily emphasizing race. . . . [O]ne becomes conscious of a new trend, and in the right way too."<sup>6</sup>

*Bloomer Girl*'s themes of emancipation and equality found potent expression in Wilson's performance of "The Eagle and Me." The number is prompted by an exchange between Pompey and Jeff, whom *Bloomer Girl* depicts as a misguided slave-owner in contrast with his cruel brother. Jeff asks him, "Pompey, haven't I always fed you, clothed you, cared for you when you were ill. . . . What made you do this to me?" Pompey replies, "Yes, but I had a special kind of sickness this time, Mr. Jefferson. It comes on after dark when you hear that train whistle a-whooin' through the cotton-woods" (1–3–40). To Arlen's buoyant, spiritual-inspired rhythms,

Pompey compares his desire for freedom to the natural state of the river and the eagle, singing that human liberty is ordained in the scriptures: "Free as the sun is free / That's how it's gotta be / Whatever is right for bumblebee / And river and eagle is right for me" (1–3–41).

A second number, the rousing, blues-inflected "I Got a Song," also made an immense impression on critics and audiences. The number was performed by Richard Huey, a veteran of Harlem and Broadway stages (as well as actors' agent), noted for his commanding voice and physical largesse. Huey played the former slave Alexander, whom Dolly has helped to escape along with Alexander and Augustus (Hubert Dilworth). In prison with Pompey for his participation in *The Lily*'s protest performance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Alexander attempts to cheer up his friend, who is distraught at the thought of being sent back to the Calhoun plantation. Asserting "I got 'em, I got 'em" of every type of song, Alexander sings (as accompanied by Pompey and Augustus): "I got a song . . . a basketful of songs—Railroad—Woman—Sinner—Bullfrog—Steamboat—Underground." While Alexander envisions freedom as "the dawn (coming) up like a cinnamon bun/You sink your teeth in the rising sun," he also addresses the horror of racial violence in his "Sinner Song":

Sinner craves a halo,  
Halo's got to be.  
Sinner gits a halo,  
And under that halo is little old me.  
Devil starts to call,  
Little me hears the call,  
Now then comes the fall.  
Right over my head that halo gets loose,  
Falls under my chin and turns to a noose. (2–2–14)

While the Civil War and the practice of slavery may have seemed remote from the World War II era, many audiences could not have failed to connect such powerful imagery with current Jim Crow practices in the South. Although awareness of civil rights had increased throughout the Roosevelt administration, the practice of lynching continued in the Southern states (Myrdal 561), along with legal injustice, police brutality, and "separate but equal." As described by Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal in his influential 1944 study *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and American Democracy* (published the same year that *Bloomer Girl* opened on Broadway): "Physical violence and threats to personal security do not, of course, occur to every Negro every day. But violence may occur at any time, and it is the fear of it as much as the violence itself which creates the injustice and the insecurity" (530). At the same time, residential segregation and economic oppression of African-Americans proliferated

throughout the United States, and *Bloomer Girl* does not limit its depiction of racism to the Jim Crow South. Linking racial oppression and capitalist greed, the show satirically portrays the profit-driven Northern complicity in Southern slavery, as Horatio Applegate and a corrupt Cicero Falls sheriff assist Hamilton Calhoun in apprehending Pompey: "Look here, Dolly—I'm entertaining a whole delegation of Southern buyers here next week—and this is no time for slaves to running loose through Cicero Falls" (1–3–43).

Promoting both women's rights and racial equality, *Bloomer Girl* expressed a utopian vision of democratic progress. Dolly reassures Pompey, "Don't give up. There's a wind coming up that's going to sweep this land from sea to sea and sweep it clean" (2–2–13). As Dolly promises Pompey the prospect of future freedom, and women a "bright new tomorrow" (1–4–55), *Bloomer Girl*, too, offered a vision of progressive nostalgia that can be directly compared to both *Oklahoma!* and Harburg's *Finian's Rainbow*, which expands upon the utopian and civil rights themes of *Bloomer Girl* within a more contemporary setting.

#### Progressive Nostalgia and Utopian Themes in *Oklahoma!*, *Bloomer Girl* and *Finian's Rainbow*

*Bloomer Girl* advocated a vision of social progress that both overlapped with, and diverged from, that of *Oklahoma!*. Beyond sharing key members of their creative teams, as well as settings of period Americana, *Oklahoma!* and *Bloomer Girl* are striking for their similarities, with Evelina and Dolly's relationship in the latter suggesting a social activist variant of Laurey and Aunt Eller in the former. Both musicals played upon the ambitious thematic reach, as well as dramatic and choreographic storytelling, of the integrated musical play, although *Bloomer Girl*—with its sardonic edge, witty lyrics, and New York setting of Cicero Falls (Seneca Falls was a nineteenth-century industrial center)—affiliates more with "the modern musical comedy" of its subtitle than does the folk musical *Oklahoma!*.<sup>7</sup> Both war-time musicals celebrated America as a land of diversity, and asserted democratic liberal values resonating with their creators' identities as second-generation Jewish-Americans. According to Harriet Hyman Alonso, "[Yip Harburg] traced his thoughts [on *Bloomer Girl*] to his own history as a Jew" (128), and regarded the fight against slavery, for women's freedom, and human freedom as one collective struggle:

And the Jews have known this for a long time. . . . The first freedom rider was Moses who came along and the whole Passover Seder and ceremony is devoted entirely to freedom. . . . If that fight [for freedom] is lost down south, the fight for the freedom of the Jews is lost. (128)

Born and raised in the ghettos of New York's Lower East Side, the Russian-Jewish Harburg (born Isidore Hochberg) consistently used fantasy-tinged lyrical satire as a tool for wide-ranging social justice, as well as a weapon to fight racial prejudice and anti-Semitism. Harburg's "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?," written with composer Jay Gorney, and originating in the 1932 revue *Americana*, epitomized Depression-era America as a stirring indictment of economic inequality. Along with *Bloomer Girl*, earlier Harburg musicals such as the anti-war satire *Hooray for What!* (1937; also choreographed by Agnes de Mille), and MGM's immortal *The Wizard of Oz* (1939)—both also written with composer Arlen—similarly drew upon the lyricist's leftist activism and his involvement in the American branch of the Popular Front (an affiliation of liberal democrats, Socialists and Communists active in the second half of the 1930s). An ardent New Deal democrat with Socialist sympathies, Harburg was among the victims of 1950s McCarthyism, blacklisted from creating for film and television (though not for the Broadway theatre) (Alonso 195).

As a period musical of nationalist myth-making, *Oklahoma!* also stemmed deeply from its creators' identities as fervent Jewish-American progressives committed to civil rights—but as Jews more integrated into the American mainstream than the radical Harburg. Born into families of successful merchant-class Jews (and famous impresarios, in the case of Hammerstein), as well as the recipients of Ivy League educations at Columbia University, both Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II shaped their upward mobility as Jews after WASP ideals of assimilation and cultural refinement, as Stuart Hecht has described (34–39). Hecht observes how *Oklahoma!* codes the Persian peddler Ali Hakim as a Jew who undergoes a "forced assimilation" into the American (i.e., WASP) community (25). Yet, at the same time, *Oklahoma!* also erased the Native Americans both from turn-of-the-century Oklahoma, and the "Indian Territory" and characters of Lynn Riggs's *Green Grow the Lilacs*. In the 1931 source play, written by a dramatist of part Cherokee descent, "many of the characters claim Indian heritage and defiantly assert their separateness from the United States" (Knapp 125). Raymond Knapp writes:

The issues taken up in *Oklahoma!* recall neither of the two sustained tragedies of the state's actual history, for there are neither Indians nor dust storms in its re-imagined landscape. Rather, the show sets up a problem it can actually solve: reconciling the farmer and the cowman [represented in the union of Laurey and Curly]. (126)

Numerous musical theater scholars, including Andrea Most and Bruce Kirle, have observed utopian themes in *Oklahoma!* Like *Bloomer Girl*, the 1943 Rodgers and Hammerstein musical is steeped in a "communal utopian

vision" (Most 107), but locates it in an American frontier past on the threshold of modernity. For a United States fighting an ethically motivated war for religious and ethnic tolerance, over which interventionists (associated with New Deal liberals) and isolationists (associated with conservatives) had been divided (Kirle 129), *Oklahoma!* patriotically united the farmer and the cowman, the WASP community and the Semitic outsider (Ali Hakim), the territory and the union, illustrating that "territory folk should stick together / territory folk should all be pals." As Most argues, "By creating a mythic time when nobody 'was better than anybody else,' when the health of the nation depended on the people's acceptance of one another, Rodgers and Hammerstein constructed a new idea of what American should be—an idea that entailed openness to ethnic openness" (107). At the same time, *Oklahoma!* romanticized American history by portraying a "whitewashed landscape" of ethnic assimilation that "contained no blacks and no Indians" (Most 117).<sup>8</sup>

By contrast, *Bloomer Girl* portrayed an America still marked by its resistance to racial and ethnic openness. The show displays problematic issues of representation that may make the 1944 musical a difficult candidate for twenty-first century revival, including its historicized "Tom Show" featuring McCracken's Daisy (playing Topsy) in blackface make-up, singing the jaunty number "Never Was Born." Nevertheless, *Bloomer Girl* resonated as a boldly progressive Broadway musical in the context of 1944. In the same *Uncle Tom's Cabin* sequence, Arlen and Harburg's "Man for Sale"—sung as two slaves, including Pompey as Uncle Tom, are being sold on the auction block—bluntly denounced the living realities of racism in America: "He's yours for the price of a rabbit's foot / And he don't eat much and he don't dream much" (2–3–26). By suggesting to audiences that slavery's legacy remained alive in Jim Crow laws and practices of segregation, and by connecting first-wave feminism with 1940s conflicts about women's rights, *Bloomer Girl* re-directed the musical's nostalgic gaze.

While *Bloomer Girl* is seldom produced today,<sup>9</sup> the musical also anticipated the classic musical fantasy-satire *Finian's Rainbow*, which reunited Harburg (as lyricist and co-librettist) and co-librettist Saidy, while teaming them with composer Burton Lane. Like *Bloomer Girl*, *Finian's Rainbow* used the conservative form of the Broadway musical to promote civil rights and social justice. However, the two musicals drew upon contrasting strategies. Produced during the turmoil of World War II, *Bloomer Girl* called for the reassuring function of nostalgia. By contrast, a booming postwar economy and return to normalcy enabled Harburg and Saidy to take more direct, contemporary aim at flaws in the American system. At the same time, the alarming transition from New Deal liberalism to nascent McCarthyism inspired a less gentle method of attack than the writers had deployed in

*Bloomer Girl*. Brilliantly mixing political satire and over-the-top ridicule with fantasy, folklore, and charm, *Finian's Rainbow* ran for 725 performances after opening at the 46th Street Theatre on 10 January 1947.

Like *Bloomer Girl*, *Finian's Rainbow* conjured utopian possibilities in its narrative and numbers. In the musical's first scene, ingénue Sharon McLongeran sings yearningly, "How Are Things in Glocca Morra": a fabricated name that (recalling Daisy's "T'morra, T'morra" in *Bloomer Girl*) actually derived from Teutonic words for "lucky tomorrow." Harburg recounted:

I want the place [Finian and Sharon] come from, the thing they're after, which is a better life, to mean something to an audience. So I want to write about a place called Glocca Morra. There is no such place on the map, but it sounds Irish. [Burton] Lane says, 'What does it mean?' [I said], 'To me, it means, glocca is a Teutonic word for *glück*, which finally got into English as luck. *Morra*, which is a Teutonic word for *morgen*, which got into English as *tomorrow*. (Alonso 156–157)

*Finian's Rainbow* follows Sharon and her father Finian, both Irish immigrants, as they arrive in a materially prosperous America that Finian, carrying a pot of gold stolen from the leprechaun Og, views as offering "a beautiful new life in a beautiful new land, where the bees give certified honey and the spiders spin their webs of nylon!" (57). Arriving in Rainbow Valley, in the Southern state of "Missetucky," Finian plans to bury Og's treasure near America's famous gold depository, with the observation that "Any man in America can plant a bit of gold in the ground—near Fort Knox—and become a millionaire" (58).

Whereas *Bloomer Girl*'s collaborators had set the musical in the Civil War-era North while alluding to current Jim Crow laws, Harburg, Saidy and Lane set *Finian's Rainbow* in a fanciful, but recognizable, present-day South. Featuring, like *Bloomer Girl*, a racially integrated cast in its original production, *Finian's Rainbow* proved so potentially incendiary in its political satire that Harburg used \$20,000 of his own savings to help back the production (Alonso 147). As Harburg recalled of the show's pre-production period, "Nobody would touch it. We knew the reason. The problem in the show was the black man's problem, the white man's problem, the racist problem, the gold problem, the Fort Knox problem. . . . Our system was reduced a little bit to absurdity" (Alonso 146).

Whereas *Bloomer Girl* suggested current political figures, *Finian's Rainbow* dared to name names in its satire. The musical comedy lampooned two virulently bigoted real-life conservatives—Kentucky Senator Theodore Bilbo (a self-admitted member of the Ku Klux Klan) and Mississippi Congressman John Rankin—by condensing them into the fictional figure of



Senator Billboard Rawkins (Alonso 173). Intent on buying and taxing the sharecroppers' land of Rainbow Valley (and with it, seizing the buried leprechaun gold), the racist Rawkins is instead magically transformed into an African-American man through Sharon's wish: "There's nothing wrong with being black. But there's something wrong with the world that he and his kind have made. . . . I wish he could know what the world is like" (67). In one exchange, the transformed Rawkins complains to Og how his blackness now limits (if not eliminates) his former privileges in the Jim Crow South:

RAWKINS: . . . You can't go into a restaurant. You can't get on a street car. You can't buy yourself a beer on a hot day. (*With disgust.*) You can't even go into a church and pray. . . . The law says you can't.

OG: The law? Mmm . . . that's a silly law. Is it a legal law?

RAWKINS. Of course it's legal. I wrote it myself. (72)

Over the course of his transformation, Rawkins learns empathy for the people he has oppressed, eventually switching to a Democratic platform, and vowing "[Now] I'm with the people. All part of my new platform of anti-poll tax, a dam in every valley, and a rainbow in every pot" (76).

Like *Bloomer Girl*, *Finian's Rainbow* envisions the freedom that will arrive "On That Great Come-and-Get-It-Day" (as the Rainbow Valley sharecroppers exult in a gospel-inflected number) (68). Yet *Finian's Rainbow* imagines a future prosperity that is defined more so by social compassion, equitable income distribution, and racial equality than by consumerist excess. Expanding Richard Dyer's definition of the utopian *sensibility* in entertainment, Harburg and Saidy envision utopia as a rainbow that continually moves "beyond the next moor" (as Sharon sings in "Look to the Rainbow," 59), but that must be continually chased in an evolving process of social justice. As Harburg (a self-described "rainbow-hustler": Lahr 68), while discussing *The Wizard of Oz*, observed of the icon most persistently pervading his work:

I don't know what happiness is and I don't think anybody knows what happiness is. . . . [The founding fathers said] "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Pursuit is the secret word in the meaning of life. It's the pursuit of something that the spirit inside you tells you that somewhere, as exemplified by the rainbow, that it isn't just this little bit of arid earth we're on, but that there is a liaison, a bridge . . . between our little planet, our little earth that we're on and the heaven of your imagination. (Alonso 88)

In this sense, the librettist's goals evoke the writings of German Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, who wrote of utopia (translating to "no place" or "nowhere") not as a fixed destination of social perfection, but a continuing "process of imagination (that is) expectant and has an objective presentiment of the not-yet-developed as well as something of the not-yet-well-developed . . . the utopian function is the unimpaired reason of a militant optimism" (qtd. in Dolan 98). At the same time, while Harburg's musicals demonstrate this militant optimism, Harburg (who frequently acknowledged his influence by George Bernard Shaw) aimed less at didacticism than to "gild the philosophic pill" through flights of whimsical lyricism, humor, and satire: "Fun is absolutely imperative. The entertainment comes first, above everything else. The medium is the important thing, just to be able to say these important things flavorsomely, refreshingly, and the people laugh while you're doing it" (Alonso 166).

With *Bloomer Girl*, Harburg and his collaborators used progressive nostalgia as a vehicle of this radical social optimism. For all its atmosphere of "old-fashioned charm," its ravishing hoop-skirted costumes, and its array of folk-like ballads and parlor songs, *Bloomer Girl* was actually a modern, and very forward-thinking, musical comedy, celebrating both American diversity and the country's still-to-be-obtained ideals of liberty and justice for all. This lavish period musical may never re-enter the repertory of frequently performed Broadway musicals, or approach the canonical status of *Oklahoma!* At the same time, *Bloomer Girl* merits greater consideration as a historically significant American musical, while illustrating the Broadway musical's omnipresent nostalgia as a multifaceted and complex force. The musical demonstrates how, contrary to the equivalence of nostalgia with sentimental escapism, the Broadway musical's primary dramaturgical engine has compatibly blended with deep social and political engagement during the genre's so-called "Golden Age"—resoundingly echoing Evelina Applegate in her anthem, "It was good enough for grandma, good enough for grandma, but it's not good enough for me" (1–3–37). □

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In his essay "Entertainment and Utopia," Dyer considered entertainment's utopian sensibility as an "affective code": "Entertainment does not . . . present models of utopian worlds, as in the classic utopias of Thomas More, William Morris *et al.* Rather, the utopianism is contained in the feelings it embodies. It presents, head-on as it were, what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organized" (20).

<sup>2</sup> Similarly, in the early 1970s, a Vietnam War-era nostalgia boom brought rose-tinted revivals of *No, No, Nanette*, (1925), *Irene* (1919), as well as the darker postmodern nostalgia of *Follies*.

<sup>3</sup> This citation format, common in unpublished Broadway musical scripts, represents the act, scene, and page number.

<sup>4</sup> Eight women served in the House of Representatives when *Bloomer Girl* opened in 1944: Mary T. Norton (Dem., NJ), Jessie Sumner (Rep., IL), Margaret Chase Smith (Rep., ME), Frances Payne Bolton (Rep., OH), Winifred Claire Stanley (Rep., NY), Clare Booth Luce (Rep., CT), Willa Lybrand Fulmer (Dem., SC), and Emily Taft Douglas (Dem., IL).

<sup>5</sup> Roosevelt's record on civil rights was flawed and complex. Though Roosevelt supported civil rights, and extended employment to hundreds of thousands of African-Americans as part of the Works Progress Administration, he also faltered on legislation. As Beard and Williams write, "[Eleanor] Roosevelt pleaded with her husband to take a firm stand on civil rights, but scared of losing the support of Southern Democrats, FDR remained aloof and did not give his support to a [1938] anti-lynching bill" (309).

<sup>6</sup> Along with *Bloomer Girl*, Hill mentioned *On the Town*, *Sing Out, Sweet Land*, *Laffing Room Only*, and *The Hasty Heart* as shows with "mixed casts projecting democracy across the footlights," while also discussing several headliners in the 1943–44 Broadway season: Paul Robeson in *Othello*, Canada Lee in *The Tempest*, and Hilda Simms in *Anna Lucasta*.

<sup>7</sup> "Musical play" and "musical comedy," however, were not fixed or stable terms for 1940s critics, who referred to the genre-mixing *Oklahoma!* as, variously, a musical play, operetta, and musical comedy. *Bloomer Girl*, too, was described as a musical comedy and a musical play by different critics.

<sup>8</sup> While *Oklahoma!* contains no African-American characters, Most has argued that farmhand Jud Frye represents "a realistic, unassimilable, and racially characterized ('dark') man" in contrast to Ali Hakim's "theatrical, assimilable ethnic ('white') immigrant." Most observes, "Jud is not specifically a black man in a white body but an uncomfortable projection onto a 'black' character of the nonwhite and un-American traits Jews feared being persecuted for" (116).

<sup>9</sup> *Bloomer Girl* was produced as a staged concert reading at City Center Encores! in 2001. The musical has also gained exposure with contemporary audience through a DVD release of an NBC/Producer's Showcase production of *Bloomer Girl* that aired in 1956 (two years after the passing of *Brown v. Board of Education*), and featured Barbara Cook as Evelina, Carmen Mathews as Dolly Bloomer, Rawn Spearman as Pompey, and Brock Peters as Alexander.

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