HARD TIMES

THE ADULT MUSICAL IN 1970s NEW YORK CITY

ELIZABETH L. WOLLMAN

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For Mom, Dad, and Philip

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ABOUT THE COMPANION WEBSITE

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Oxford has created a website to accompany *Hard Times* so that readers may view images related to the discussion and listen to clips of songs from most of the musicals discussed. The companion can be accessed with the username Music3 and the password Book3234. To view an image or listen to an audio example, simply click on the appropriate link on the website.

Many of the musicals featured in this book are particularly obscure, and their scores were never commercially recorded. Some of the audio clips have thus been excerpted from private recordings and are not of pristine quality. Nevertheless I have chosen to include as many clips as possible so that readers can get at least some sense of what these productions sounded like.

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Introduction

Look at the sensual exhibitions of the feminine form! Listen to the salacious music! See the appeals to the sensational and the pandering to the base and vulgar elements of human nature! Hear the gross innuendo and notice the foul suggestion! Who will deny that these things are immensely damaging to the public taste and terribly ruinous to the public morals?

—Editorial in the *New York Times,* November 8, 1868, quoted in Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture*

On a chilly morning in late March 1969, nine young actors gathered for the first rehearsal of a show that they knew little about, save that it was all about sex. Having arrived at their rehearsal space—a filthy, dilapidated theater on the Lower East Side of Manhattan—the actors nervously arranged themselves on metal chairs that had been haphazardly arranged in a circle and listened intently to their rumpled, thickly mustachioed director. They stole curious glances at one another, looked away, and shyly looked again. They wore nothing but yellow cotton robes.[1]

Their shaggy, soft-spoken director bluntly informed them that they had been very carefully screened during the audition process, because in having been cast for this particular show, they ran the risk of running into all kinds of trouble—with the law, with their own careers, with their friends and relatives, with their romantic partners. They were told that rehearsals would be particularly intense: for at least six hours a day, six days a week, they would not only sing, dance, and block the show, but would also become deeply, intimately familiar with one another emotionally and physically through what the director referred to as "sensitivity exercises." The director then informed the cast members that despite the intimate nature of their rehearsal sessions, they were never, under any circumstances, to engage in sexual relations with one another outside of the rehearsal space.

Within an hour the robes had been dropped. The cast members began, tentatively at first, and then with growing enthusiasm, to gaze upon, touch, kiss, and fondle one another's naked bodies. Rehearsals for *Oh! Calcutta!* were under way.

While certainly the most famous and long running, *Oh! Calcutta!* was hardly the only musical of its kind to appear in New York City during the 1970s. Rather, a number of "adult" musicals cropped up on and especially off Broadway over the course of the decade. Adult musicals generally distinguished themselves from other types of musicals in their reliance on any or all of the following: full-frontal nudity, simulated sexual activity, sexually suggestive or explicit dialogue or musical numbers, or plotlines containing what contemporary ratings boards would label as strong sexual content.

With exceptions, representatives of the subgenre were reviled by theater critics when they were reviewed at all. Critics alternately attacked adult musicals for going too far in the direction of hard-core pornography or for not going far enough, for being too sugary and breezy about the country's rapidly changing sexual mores, or for being too preachy and heavy-handed about them. Many members of the commercial theater industry worried that the more explicit adult musicals were not terribly distinct from the live sex shows and pornographic films that had begun to proliferate in New York City, especially in the Times Square area, by the late 1960s. Nevertheless adult musicals appealed to many producers—especially young, cash-strapped up-and-comers—because they were easy to cast with eager unknowns, usually cheap to stage, and of course not terribly hard to costume. And even the ones that earned the nastiest reviews often managed to run long enough to make at least a modest amount of money. Clearly, and certainly as befitting the mood of the era, 1970s spectators were more interested in the sex that adult musicals offered than in what critics thought about their orchestrations, scenic design, or narrative flow.

Adult musicals fell out of fashion by the late 1970s as the country inched toward the more socially and politically conservative 1980s. Few scripts were published or recordings made, and virtually no scholarly work exists on this subgenre. Historians and journalists who mention adult musicals at all tend to focus on how dated they seem, with their low-budget sets; their mellow, soft-rock scores; their soft-bodied, hirsute cast members undulating earnestly under dimmed stage lights; and their cheery messages about how sex is fun and bodies are beautiful. A few have noted as well the seemingly mercenary desires of producers and directors eager to capitalize on the faddishness of stage nudity and simulated sex, spurred specifically by the commercial success of *Hair* in 1968 and more generally by the cultural tenor of the time.[2]

Yet while they have been dismissed as mere trifles that collectively amount to the musical theater equivalent of streaking—a silly fad befitting a silly decade—adult musicals represent aspects of 1970s American culture at their messiest and most confused, and thus perhaps at their most honest. Adult musicals simultaneously drew from and reflected the country's rapidly changing, often contradictory attitudes about gender and sexuality at a time when the sexual revolution had given way to the gay and women's liberation movements, New York City was teetering toward bankruptcy, hard-core pornography had become trendy, and heated debates about the relationship between art and obscenity were being waged in courts, in the media, and in communities across the country.

TROUBLING TERMINOLOGY

This book is about commercial musicals that were directly influenced by the sexual revolution, staged on or off Broadway in New York City during the 1970s and at least at some point in their production histories aimed specifically at mainstream audiences. The musicals discussed herein thus all focus on some aspect of human sexuality as it was being negotiated in the United States during the 1970s. Yet as is often the case with labels, applying the term *adult musical* to all shows that fit this general description is problematic. While many of these shows were sexually explicit, even the most risqué could not be—and were typically not, whether by spectators, critics, or members of the production itself—considered truly pornographic, at least according to Linda Williams's "minimal" and "neutral" definition of the term as "the visual (and sometimes aural) representation of living, moving bodies engaged in explicit, usually unfaked, sexual acts with a primary intent of arousing viewers."[3] Rather, adult musicals featured sexual activity that was simulated, not real, and few if any were specifically designed to cause sexual arousal among audience members. Most were meant instead to comment on the sociosexual mores of the time: to criticize them, praise them, educate audiences about them, spoof them, capitalize on them. In this respect, the term *adult* is not an ideal descriptor because of its widespread use as a euphemism for pornography.[4] And adult musicals were, even at the time, rarely perceived as pornographic, which points again to problems that many of them had in terms of reception by both critics and audiences. So many were perceived as occupying a strange middle ground—not erotic enough on the one hand, yet too risqué to be considered serious theater on the other—that describing what adult musicals are *not* is far easier than neatly defining what they *are*.[5]

Nevertheless the term *adult musicals* is the one I find myself returning to, despite its shortcomings and despite several attempts to come up with snappier, more accurate alternatives. When I first began my research, for example, I was in the habit of using the term *nudie musicals*, which I eventually abandoned since many of these musicals not only featured no nudity, but were staged by individuals who took pains to avoid it for fear that naked bodies would distract audiences from the musicals' overlying social or political messages. The term *nudie musicals* is thus inappropriate for many of the same reasons that some of the subgenre's directors chose to keep their actors clothed. While copious nudity is certainly one of the subgenre's more evocative features, it is also one of the more superficial and distracting; thus to focus overmuch on the nudity in these productions is to lose sight of their meanings. For many of the same reasons that *nudie musicals* fails as a proper descriptor, *sex musicals*—tempting because it can be condensed into the catchy term *sexicals*—seems too focused on the subgenre's overtly suggestive aspects. While aptly descriptive, the phrase *commercial musicals staged in New York City during the 1970s that were directly influenced by the sexual revolution, women's liberation, or gay liberation* is just a tad too wordy. Imperfect though it may be, then, *adult musicals* seems more suitable than any other descriptor I have been able to come up with.

The fact that the term *adult musicals* was coined by the sole individual to write previously about this subgenre, and thus automatically holds some degree of aca-

demic street cred, only contributes to my fondness for the term. *Adult musicals* was first used, at least as far as he knows, by Jonathan Ward, in his 2002 feature article "'Come in My Mouth': The Story of the Adult Musicals of the 70s," which ran in the online music magazine *Perfect Sound Forever*.[6] Along with a cassette tape of *Let My People Come* that the friend of a friend sent me as a joke when I was researching rock musicals over a decade ago, Ward's article was responsible for first piquing my curiosity about this subgenre; both the article and the author continued to be important fonts of information during the research process. In using Ward's terminology, I express my gratitude to him for laying the groundwork.

WHY THE NEED FOR EXPOSURE?

Because of the economic and aesthetic difficulties that plagued the commercial theater in New York City during this period, the 1970s has been largely ignored by musical theater historians, many of whom tend to focus on the decade's mainstream high points—*Grease, The Wiz, A Chorus Line,* the works of Stephen Sondheim—and otherwise write the decade off as a series of forgettable flops unworthy of attention or analysis. Of course, the fact that a number of scholars ascribe the end of Broadway's so-called Golden Age to the late 1960s or very early 1970s, thereby inadvertently dismissing the past forty-plus years of Broadway musicals as inherently subpar, does not help matters much, nor does a general tendency among those writing about the musical theater to focus almost entirely on critical and commercial hits on Broadway at the expense of more modest successes, let alone abject flops.[7] By necessity, then, this book departs from the norm: precious few adult musicals became blockbusters, and many small, modestly successful adult musicals running in New York during the 1970s resonated with audiences at the time, even if they have faded largely from cultural memory in the decades since.

Those writers who have discussed musical theater in the 1970s tend to focus specifically on the works of one composer or one individual and usually critically and financially successful Broadway production. For example, in *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theater*, John Bush Jones makes the musical *Grease* central to a chapter on 1970s nostalgia and its relationship to spectacle. In *The Megamusical*, Jessica Sternfeld pinpoints the birth of that subgenre in the 1970s productions of *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Evita*.[8] And of course there is no shortage of books on the many contributions that Stephen Sondheim has made to the American musical theater.[9] While many of these studies are excellent, most focus more on the productions themselves than they do on the relationship between the musical theater and its sociocultural surroundings.

This book attempts a comprehensive study of a single musical theater subgenre that existed during a specific decade in a specific place, taking into consideration social, political, and economic contexts. With this approach, I hope to build on the many musical theater studies that focus primarily on sexuality and gender.[10] I also aim to provide a clearer picture of New York's theater scene as a whole during a particular time and to contribute to a better understanding of the social and sexual culture in which these productions were developed and staged.

As I did in my previous book, here I move beyond what I see as a tendency to compartmentalize analyses of the musical theater as it has developed in New York City.[11] Most writing about the American stage musical tends to treat Broadway as central to the genre's development. This approach is, of course, entirely appropriate when it comes to the history of the genre as it unfolded through the mid-twentieth century. But any study that focuses on the musical theater as it has developed since the 1950s must take into consideration the enormous contributions of Off and Off Off Broadway.[12]

Off and especially Off Off Broadway were the loci for influential experimentation and innovation during the 1960s and early 1970s. Although these three realms of New York theater are often treated as separate entities—with, for example, histories of Broadway more or less ignoring Off and Off Off Broadway, and vice versa—they in fact have historically exerted a great deal of influence on one another. Off Broadway, originally known as the Little Theater Movement, developed through the 1950s as a smaller, less risky, less expensive alternative to Broadway; as it became increasingly commercial through the late 1950s and early 1960s, the even-more-experimental and freewheeling Off Off Broadway movement was born.[13]

Like rock musicals, some adult musicals were created specifically for Broadway runs, but most were nurtured Off and Off Off Broadway. This is due in part to the fact that just as Broadway, plagued by financial problems and perceived as stubbornly outdated, entered something of a commercial and aesthetic rut in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Off and especially Off Off Broadway realms experienced a heyday. Committed to making theater that challenged the social, cultural, and political perceptions of audiences, and thus to staging tiny revolutions on minuscule budgets, Off Off Broadway artisans grew invigorated by the antiwar movement, the messages of contemporary youth culture(s), the sexual revolution, and even the country's economic downturn. The movement thus exerted unprecedented stylistic influence on the theatrical mainstream. So, then, did adult musicals, which, while small and seemingly insignificant, in fact reflect the slow absorption of the sexual revolution into mainstream America through the course of the decade.

I thus intend to build on some of the excellent studies that detail the history of the Off and Off Off Broadway scenes.[14] While these studies do not necessarily focus on the slew of musicals that were written and performed Off and Off Off Broadway at the time, they nevertheless provide a great deal of information about the Caffe Cino and Judson Poets' Theater, both of which either directly or indirectly contributed to the development of the adult musical and will be discussed at length in this book.

COMINGS AND GOINGS: THE STRUCTURAL APPROACH

This study focuses primarily on commercial adult musicals staged in New York City during the 1970s. While the structure is roughly chronological, some discussions appear out of chronological order so that relevant social, commercial, entertainment, or theater trends can be considered. To this end, while most musicals are discussed once in specific chapters, a few are examined in several different chapters in relation

to specific issues. Because they enjoyed the longest commercial runs and thus stirred more than a typical share of controversies, for example, *Oh! Calcutta!* and *Let My People Come* are revisited several times in the book.

The central chapters consider legal, economic, political, aesthetic, or cultural issues that relate to adult musicals, either individually or collectively. While each chapter has its own trajectory and point of view, some of the chapters share related topics, and thus work well in tandem. Chapters 2 and 3, for example, are about gay musicals; chapters 4 and 5 are about feminist musicals; and chapters 6, 7, and 8 are about obscenity and the law. Readers interested in particular themes or topics may thus choose to read specific chapters.

Chapter 1 examines the aesthetic predecessors to the adult musical. These include relatively early forms like vaudeville and burlesque, which developed and cross-pollinated through the late nineteenth century and early twentieth. More immediate influences are also considered, in particular the Off Off Broadway scene as it developed from the mid-1950s through the 1970s. The rock musical *Hair*—which was developed Off Off Broadway in 1966, staged Off Broadway in 1967, and then reworked into an enormously successful Broadway production in 1968—is treated as an immediate and monumentally influential predecessor to the adult musical in general. The earliest of the adult musicals—*We'd Rather Switch, Oh! Calcutta!, Salvation,* and *Stag Movie*—are also discussed here.

Chapter 2 focuses on the rise of the gay rights movement, the Caffe Cino scene, the play *The Boys in the Band,* and the musical *Company*, all of which influenced depictions of gay men in adult musicals after *Oh! Calcutta!* Because Off Off Broadway was the cradle of modern gay theater long before the Stonewall riots erupted in June 1969, it became thereafter a convenient home for a number of gay rights–themed musicals, including *The Faggot, Boy Meets Boy, Lovers*, *Gay Company,* and *Sextet*. These musicals, which are related to the trajectory of the gay rights movement during the 1970s, are the subject of chapter 3.

While not as immediately influential, the second wave of feminism, which is the focus of chapter 4, nevertheless had a strong impact on adult musicals, especially in terms of the genre's depictions of sexual freedom and pleasure. While overtly polemical musicals like Myrna Lamb's *Mod Donna* (1970) tended not to sit well with critics or spectators, the lighter, more humorous feminist musicals from the later 1970s—Eve Merriam's *The Club* and especially Nancy Ford and Gretchen Cryer's *I'm Getting My Act Together and Taking It on the Road*—were far more commercially successful. These two musicals are the subject of chapter 5.

Chapter 6 traces the history of obscenity law, with emphasis on those rulings handed down between the mid-1950s and early 1970s that most directly impacted mass entertainment in the United States. The increased public acceptance of pornographic movies, the changing definitions of the word *obscenity*, and the blurred boundaries between art and erotica are related to the musical theater on the stage. "Porno chic" and its influence on *Let My People Come* are considered in this chapter. Chapter 7 continues to examine the impact of porno chic as the decade continued; musicals considered in this chapter include the feature film *The First Nudie Musical*,

the porn-musical hybrid film *Alice in Wonderland: An X-Rated Musical Fantasy,* and the Marilyn Chambers live revue *Le Bellybutton*.

Chapter 8 considers the impact of contemporary obscenity laws on the play *Che!* and the musical *Let My People Come*. Chapter 9 examines the socioeconomic health of New York City between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s, and the impact of the financial crisis on the city's Broadway and Off Broadway theaters. The theater industry's desire to clean up an increasingly seedy Times Square—in part by setting a good example and offering wholesome family- and tourist-friendly musicals—clashed with its need to keep up with the country's rapidly changing social and sexual mores and to compete with newer, more explicit, mass-mediated forms of entertainment. The view of the sexual revolution in the 1977 hit Broadway musical *I Love My Wife* reflects the ultimate "mainstreaming" of the adult musical. The conclusion considers the influences that the adult musical of the 1970s have had on commercial musicals that have run in New York City, either on or Off Broadway, since the 1990s.

MARKETPLACE, CANON, ARCHIVE, MEMORY: METHODOLOGY

Adult musicals constitute a subgenre that simultaneously drew from and reflected American culture at a time when "a new ethic of personal liberation trumped older notions of decency, civility, and restraint," resulting in a population that collectively decided, at least for the better part of a decade, to just "let it all hang loose."[15] Yet, with the possible exception of *Oh! Calcutta!*, which remains well known largely because of its extraordinary longevity, the entire subgenre has slipped rather rapidly from cultural memory. This is likely because adult musicals were, almost overwhelmingly, relatively small-scale productions that together did not have anywhere near the aesthetic or commercial impact of, say, Rodgers and Hammerstein or Sondheim or megamusicals. But it also has at least something to do with the fact that adult musicals existed during—and actively reflected aspects of—a time period that is, for a host of reasons, hardly revered as a glorious or memorable time in contemporary American history. Rather, as Beth Bailey and David Farber note in their introduction to *America in the Seventies:*

> The 1970s may be our strangest decade. It was an era of incoherent impulses, contradictory desires, and even a fair amount of self-flagellation. It was the decade that gave us the yellow smiley face, a sadly ironic symbol for a nation on the downswing of postwar prosperity. It was an age of limits and an age of excess: gas lines, pet rocks, and sixteen minutes of orgasmic moaning in Donna Summer's 1975 hit, "Love to Love You Baby." The 1970s were a time when "earth-tone polyester" made sense.[16]

The 1970s also had the great misfortune of coming directly after—and thus being almost immediately overshadowed by—the 1960s, which has been celebrated since it happened as "a decade of passion, grandeur, and tragedy."[17] In sharp contrast, the 1970s was painted, even as it progressed, as an era of defeat in Vietnam, political

leadership that was disappointing at best and baldly corrupt at worst, endless oil crises, staggering economic problems, disenchantment, disenfranchisement, stupid fads, and ugly pants.[18] As cultural memory would have it, adult musicals, much like pet rocks and high-heeled sneakers filled with goldfish, reflect Americans at their most puerile, during the most absurd of recent decades: tucked behind cocktail tables in their leisure suits and feathered hairdos, gawking as naked actors sing, dance, and simulate sex acts for the price of admission and a two-drink minimum.

Yet cultural memory, or "the interplay of present and past in socio-cultural contexts," cannot be equated with history itself.[19] Rather, a culture collectively and perpetually decides not only how to remember itself—and thus what to preserve, to forget, to canonize, or to render to the junk piles of the past—but also how it wishes to be remembered as history unfolds. Because, as Aleida Assmann points out, "forgetting is the normality of personal and cultural life," memory is unique. It is the "exception which—especially in the cultural sphere—requires special and costly precautions."[20] Cultures choose to remember and to perpetuate themselves in specific ways, so that "in the context of cultural memory, the distinction between myth and history vanishes."[21]

Cultural artifacts, which help perpetuate cultural memory, can exist in several places: actively in the marketplace and the canon or passively in the archive. In some cases, past examples of cultural production continue to occupy all three. More than forty years after they hit their artistic peak, for example, the Beatles continue to be celebrated as musical innovators in Western collective memory. This collective memory is reinforced by the widespread availability of Beatles recordings, published writings, interviews, and written reception history, both in archives and in the marketplace. Having been canonized as one of the most important and innovative bands in popular music history, the Beatles are taught in schools, written about in books, and broadcast regularly via mass media. Constant exposure to the band, even decades after their breakup, helps perpetuate collective memory about them: they were artists; their music is important; they are worth remembering and teaching to later generations.

And yet the cultural memory of someone or something can never be mistaken for the event itself or the person himself or herself. A scholar, for example, can devote her life to the obsessive study of every cultural artifact pertaining to Mozart and still never know who, exactly, Mozart was or precisely how he was perceived in his place and time. In *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture*, Robert C. Allen reminds us that "objects and texts alone do not constitute culture," but that culture is instead created as "groups of people make sense, relevance, and pleasure out of the symbol systems they encounter in their daily experience."[22] As these "symbol systems" are sifted through time, their immediacy is lost, and they are either preserved as artifacts that help fuel cultural memory, or they are forgotten.

Which brings us back to adult musicals, a subgenre that American cultural memory has not treated very kindly. Not only were many adult musicals never recorded (or, if they were, then only poorly on vinyl or reel-to-reel tapes that have long since been sent to attics, basements, or dumpsters), but many of the performers, directors, and

writers are either impossible to trace (due to assumed names, career changes, or self-imposed anonymity, all of which make identifying and locating them prohibitively difficult) or dead. Audience members proved similarly hard to track down. A number of people I've spoken with vaguely remember seeing the odd adult musical, but almost always the exclamation "I saw *Oh! Calcutta!*" or "I saw *Let My People Come*" is followed immediately by an apologetic statement such as "I can hardly remember it." "I was really drunk." "I was completely stoned." Or, "It was the seventies, you know." Because most of these shows were done by small theater companies on shoestring budgets, media coverage was relatively scant, and thus many adult musicals take up little or no space in archives. Although it is true that cultural artifacts and second-hand memories are not equivalent to culture itself, I often found myself longing for more in the way of tangible evidence or of stronger recollections from a larger pool of company members and spectators.

While adult musicals existed during a time that I experienced directly, I have not seen a vast majority of the musicals discussed herein. As the child of an uprooted New Yorker who never relinquished his strong ties to the city, I visited New York very frequently in my youth, before relocating here permanently in 1987. I have plenty of firsthand knowledge, as well as some crystal-clear memories, of the city in the 1970s. That said, the closest I ever came to seeing a 1970s adult musical was the afternoon I decided, while standing on the TKTS line with my parents and younger sister, that we should get tickets to see *Oh! Calcutta!* Because I was eight years old at the time, the answer was, of course, a firm no. Thus although I have read extant scripts, convinced the occasional original company member, composer, or lyricist to sing for me, listened repeatedly to several selfishly guarded if absolutely dismal bootleg recordings of performances, and tracked down original cast recordings whenever possible, many of these musicals remain frustratingly evasive. In piecing together the story of adult musicals, I have relied on those accounts that *have* made it into various archives, those recordings that remain available in the marketplace, and, most important, the memories of as many participants in adult musicals as I could find and who were willing to speak with me.

This, however, brings me to another challenge: as befitting the decade during which they existed, adult musicals are enormously embarrassing to many of the people who wrote and produced them, many of the actors who performed in them, many of the spectators who saw them, and many of the critics who deigned to review them. This embarrassment is often palpable in the writings that have been left behind by critics, many of whom were clearly made just as uneasy by the sight of naked bodies simulating sex as they were by clothed actors talking frankly about sexual freedom, gay rights, and women's liberation. Embarrassment was also customary in many of the interviews I conducted with actors, writers, producers, composers, and directors, a few of whom were reticent to speak with me at all and a larger number of whom sat for interviews but were nevertheless quick to tell me that their work in adult musicals was not their proudest moment, or something that they only did once, or something that they did because it was trendy, or something they took part in when they were young, naïve, foolish, and quite possibly perpetually stoned.

While this current of embarrassment is, as noted earlier, reflective of the ways the 1970s are preserved in cultural memory, it speaks as well to the fact that while the sexual revolution pervaded mainstream America in the 1970s, its entire citizenry did not thus suddenly, magically rise up and embrace the "new" sexuality with nary a blush. The nebulous middle ground, mentioned earlier, that many adult musicals occupied, hit home for a lot of critics and spectators, who were often just as embarrassed by human sexuality in the 1970s as most people were during any other time in American history. Further, and from a distance of several decades, the sexual openness and frequent proclamations of acceptance that were so integral to so many of these musicals clearly strikes even many of my informants as sneeringly quaint and naïve. Thus embarrassment has colored a great deal of the preserved history of this subgenre.

Any road to the past is filled with myriad pitfalls in the form of hazy memories, conflicting reports, exaggerations, revisions, omissions, and mistakes. I have tried my best to reconstruct as respectful a chronicle of this subgenre as possible, and I take responsibility for all errors, misinterpretations, and misrepresentations herein. With this book I hope to shed light on a long-ignored and thus little-known subgenre of the musical theater. My concern that what I am documenting may not always be perfectly accurate has been trumped by my desire to make sense of what continues to strike me as an oddly innocent, curiously touching subgenre—to allow it, at the very least, to take its proper place in the archive; to ease some of the collective embarrassment about it and its time; and even, perhaps, to nudge it, however gently, back into the approving embrace of collective memory.

CHAPTER 1

Burlesque, Off Off Broadway, and the Birth of the Adult Musical

This is the best fucking show I've ever seen!
—Buddy Hackett, on *Oh! Calcutta!*

I think it is disgusting, shameful and damaging to all things American. But if I were 22, with a great body, it would be artistic, tasteful, patriotic, and a progressive religious experience.
—Shelley Winters, on *Oh! Calcutta!*

When it opened at the Biltmore Theater on April 29, 1968, *Hair: The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical* became the first critically and commercially successful rock musical to land on Broadway. *Hair* served as a linchpin that harnessed the commercial potential of the theatrical mainstream to the experimentalism of Off Off Broadway. Featuring a book and lyrics by Open Theater members Gerome Ragni and James Rado and an innovative score by the jazz and R&B musician Galt MacDermot,[1] *Hair* was originally produced Off Broadway in 1967 as the inaugural production of Joseph Papp's Public Theater. Recast and reworked by the La MaMa director Tom O'Horgan for its leap to Broadway,[2] *Hair* retained a distinct Off Off Broadway sensibility due to its disjunct structure, frequent disregard of the traditional fourth wall, mélange of left-leaning social and political messages, and emphasis on collaboration and communal experience in both rehearsal and performance. *Hair* was celebrated as well for its catchy, contemporary-sounding score, the improvisatory feel of its loose plotline, and its disarmingly affectionate depiction of a subculture that was often misunderstood or maligned by the middle-aged mainstream that comprised a majority of the Broadway audience.

Yet none of *Hair*'s innovations had quite the immediate impact of its use of full-frontal nudity during the reenactment of a human be-in at the end of Act I. In a 1993 interview with the *New York Times*, Tom O'Horgan looked back and winced at this particular innovation. After *Hair* opened on Broadway, he remembered, it seemed that every play to open in New York "had to have an obligatory nude scene, no matter what, usually in the most tasteless possible fashion."[3]

By 1968 stage nudity was in fact being used fairly regularly in the Off Off Broadway realm, where O'Horgan had established his reputation. Yet *Hair* is frequently credited as the straw that broke the naked camel's back. The musical's extraordinary commercial success resulted in countless imitations, and thus a lot more stage nudity, not only Off Off Broadway but in the commercial mainstream, and not only in straight plays, but suddenly in musicals as well. By the end of the 1968–69 season, stage nudity had attained such faddishness that the critic Otis L. Guernsey Jr. was prompted to gripe that for all the nudity and groping happening onstage, very "little came of it except publicity, and not much of that. There was hardly even a sense of shock. Theatrically speaking, the nudity and mimed fornication accomplished so little, at the cost of so much effort, that perhaps we have got *that* notion out of the way at last, once and for all."[4] Guernsey was wrong, of course. When it came to stage nudity, the late 1960s were just the beginning.

While *Hair*'s nude scene almost single-handedly jump-started the adult musicals fad during the 1970s, the musical's impact on the subgenre went somewhat deeper. Like *Hair*, most adult musicals were topical, featured rock- and contemporary pop-based scores, and took, at the very least, a cursory stab at left-leaning social or political issues. Also like *Hair*, adult musicals were influenced by the overarching aesthetics and idealism of Off Off Broadway and, by extension, the various youth-driven social and political movements that had begun to take hold during the 1960s. *Hair*'s cocreator James Rado remembers that he and Gerome Ragni were always certain about who their ideal audience should be. "The original impulse was to write it for Broadway," Rado remembers. "We didn't want to just preach to the colored folks, to the Off Off Broadway scene. We wanted to bring the whole message and the scene uptown to a wider audience."[5] Like *Hair*, many adult musicals were ultimately used as much to educate mainstream audiences about contemporary sociosexual mores as to entertain.

While there is no question that *Hair* was an important immediate predecessor, adult musicals nevertheless also reflect the imprints of much older entertainment forms. The adult musical is probably most intimately connected with the overarching aesthetics and idealism of the Off Off Broadway experimentalism of the 1960s. But aesthetically speaking, adult musicals owe much to classic burlesque, both for its bawdy subject matter and, more often than not, its structure. In this chapter I consider both distant and immediate predecessors of the earliest adult musicals, *We'd Rather Switch* and *Oh! Calcutta!*, both of which opened within a year of *Hair*'s premiere on Broadway.

IMMEDIATE PREDECESSORS: THE OFF OFF BROADWAY MOVEMENT

At both a physical and a philosophical distance from the Great White Way, Off Off Broadway inhabited roughly the same geographical area as its immediate predecessor, the Off Broadway realm, but was freer in terms of its organization and objectives.[6] The loose movement began in the late 1950s in reaction to Off Broadway's increasing commercialism and stretched even further than Off Broadway had in terms of scope and experimentation. Throughout the 1960s Off Off Broadway was populated by individuals and collectives devoted to developing artistically challenging work in alternative, noncommercial spaces. In New York

City during the 1960s members of the theatrical avant-garde pondered various ways that the theater might help transform a tumultuous nation. Many Off Off Broadway collectives devoted themselves to developing theater as a tool for sociopolitical change by blending political and aesthetic radicalism, pushing the boundaries of what was deemed theatrically appropriate, and encouraging audiences to engage directly with—and thereby become part of—performances.[7]

Although stage nudity would be adapted far more readily Off Off Broadway than in the commercial realm, it was relatively taboo in all of New York's theaters through the early 1960s. This would begin to change after the Royal Shakespeare Company's production of Peter Weiss's *The Persecution and Assassination of Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade* (commonly known as *Marat/Sade*) opened to critical acclaim at Broadway's Martin Beck Theater on December 27, 1965. This political morality play, directed by Peter Brook, was widely celebrated for its innovative staging, which reflected the influence of both Brecht and Artaud. *Marat/Sade* created a sensation as well not only because it featured plenty of "guillotined heads, buckets of red, white, and blue blood being poured down drains," and one "actress using her long hair as a whip," but also because it allowed audiences a glimpse of the naked backside of Ian Richardson as Marat, who at one point emerged naked from a bathtub beneath the stage.[8] Although this first flash of nudity took place on a Broadway stage, it was Off Off Broadway that would recognize Richardson's exposed *derrière* as the beginnings of a trend and run with it.

Due in large part to the influence of the sexual revolution, stage nudity became increasingly fashionable in the experimental realm through the mid- to late 1960s. The playwright Robert Patrick remembers that the trend was less inspired by a desire to shock audiences than by a genuine interest in creating honest depictions of the human condition. "When we first started putting nudity into plays, it was in situations where people would be nude in real life," he recalls. "So when people were making love in my plays, I had them nude! Who makes love in armor?"[9] As Off Off Broadway continued to exert stylistic influence on the mainstream, nudity became an increasingly familiar, if still controversial, feature on both fringe and commercial stages and arguably helped draw audiences to plays like *Scuba Duba* (Off Broadway, 1967), *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (Broadway, 1968), *Sweet Eros* (Off Broadway, 1968) and *Tom Paine* (Off Off Broadway, 1968).

In the 1968 article "Theater of the Nude," which appeared in that paean to nudity, *Playboy* magazine, the journalist Howard Junker opined that stage nudity was no passing fad, but a crucial aspect of the revolution that he believed was taking place in the theater, and in the country at large. In their attempts to "knock down the barrier between art and life and make the audience part of the action," Junker wrote, radical playwrights in New York City were well on their way to transforming contemporary drama into a ritual of collectivism and collaboration, "where everybody is involved and the sound and the fury is all around." Nudity, he argued, was a central part of the contemporary theater's transformation. "It stands for freedom, for shedding old taboos, for throwing off the up-tight conventions of the older generation," he wrote. "For actors, trained to hide behind their roles, nudity can be a challenge. Actors have to work free of their own inhibitions in order to peel before an audience. Perhaps this

kind of liberation will work for the audience, too. Instead of hiding behind conventional responses, it will come alive, jolted by the confrontation of naked self with naked self."[10]

Junker wasn't completely off the mark here. The increasingly copious use of stage nudity by the end of the 1960s was representative of the fringe's attempts to close the gap between audience and performer and to use theater as a tool with which to explore socially relevant subject matter, including that which, like sexuality, was traditionally considered taboo. Nevertheless Junker's argument for stage nudity as the key to revolution proved a bit overzealous, especially considering the fact that for every radical committed to using stage nudity toward social change, there were two or three entrepreneurs who were just as interested in the money that could be made by hiring young, good-looking people to show a little skin. Plenty of adult musicals were developed by companies or individuals devoted to some sort of social or political agenda, but just as many were backed by starry-eyed young producers eager to make a buck. Because adult musicals developed as the ideals of the counterculture and New Left were rapidly being absorbed into the commercial mainstream, most ended up with feet in both camps.

While adult musicals reflected some of the ideological influence of Off Off Broadway, a much older, more overtly commercial form also had a hand in shaping the subgenre. By the time adult musicals began to appear in New York City in the late 1960s, classic American burlesque had been dead for over twenty-five years. Nevertheless, the 1970s subgenre would not have existed if not for burlesque's aesthetic and structural influence.

DISTANT PREDECESSORS: THE RISE OF BURLESQUE

Burlesque was so subversive for its time that it was eventually driven out of New York City by religious and antivice activists, Times Square business owners, and municipal officials.[11] Burlesque's demise, which took place between 1937 and 1942, was largely the result of social concerns about what it had become infamous for by the early twentieth century: scantily clad women on sexual display for audiences consisting primarily of working-class men. Yet when it first arrived in the United States a century earlier, burlesque bore little resemblance to the "filth" that Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia would eventually chase out of New York City in his quest to preside over "a clean American city" and to protect the morality of its citizens.[12]

Although burlesque shows have been documented in the United States as early as the 1840s, it was not until Lydia Thompson and her troupe of British Blondes arrived from London in 1868 to perform *Ixion* at Wood's Broadway Theater in lower Manhattan that the entertainment form became all the rage, first in New York, and then across the country. British burlesque derived from pantomime, which Thompson had performed regularly during the early years of her career (Ex. 1.1).[13] Yet while pantomime was typically based on familiar children's stories, nineteenth-century burlesque tended instead to lampoon entertainment forms that were associated with high culture: drama, opera, and classic literature.