Social Media in Musical Theatre
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To Kayla
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Introduction

I know we aren’t supposed to talk about him, but I think it’s time. We need to talk about . . . Bruno. Sure, the Madrigal family repeatedly tells us in Encanto (2021), “We don’t talk about Bruno.” We take a vow of silence. We don’t air out the family’s dirty laundry. We just don’t. But what do we make of this vow of silence when something goes viral and saturates the popular culture zeitgeist? Let me just tell you: we talk about it.

In the first half of 2022, social media was filled with viral content about Encanto, much of it riffing off the film’s score by Lin-Manuel Miranda and, especially, the film’s breakout song “We Don’t Talk about Bruno.” When Encanto debuted in November 2021, it was the rare animated Disney film that didn’t immediately become a commercial hit. Audiences didn’t flock to cinemas to buy tickets (of course, we were by then in the second year of the Covid-19 pandemic). Reviews were average at best. Word of mouth was lukewarm. The film, it seemed, was a flop and, accordingly, would be out of the popular imagination by the New Year.

Then something unexpected happened. Encanto found a second wave. The film became available for streaming on
Disney+ on December 24, 2021. The soundtrack had been released on Spotify, Apple Music, and the like on November 19, 2021, to correspond with the film’s premiere. But now, movie audiences wanted to listen to the soundtrack. They wanted to listen to it a lot. These digital happenings breathed new life into Encanto. And social media caught fire. Soon, TikTok, YouTube, and Twitter were filled with videos, memes, reviews, parodies, and other digital content playing with the dramaturgy of Encanto. Suddenly Encanto was everywhere.

Encanto’s journey from flop to social media darling and viral sensation reveals the power that social media holds to penetrate, shift, and influence popular culture. Encanto conveys the role of social media to engender a conversation that made a musical film one of the most discussed and influential pieces of popular culture in 2022. While the film barely made a cultural imprint upon its theatrical release, social media enabled an organic, fan-driven marketing campaign to begin. In order to fully participate in mainstream social media during this time, folks had to watch Encanto and listen to the soundtrack, both digital activities that boosted the film’s algorithmic reach. With each subsequent view and listen, digital audiences trained algorithms to promote Encanto.

Take, for instance, Encanto’s cultural influence on TikTok. On TikTok, the #Encanto hashtag has over 30 billion views as of March 2023. The sound bite for “We Don’t Talk about Bruno” has over 850,000 unique videos; “The Family Madrigal” has over 400,000 videos; and “Surface Pressure” has over 150,000 videos. These songs became part of the TikTok sonic landscape, trending alongside more expected
sound bites from the likes of Beyoncé, Lizzo, and Megan Thee Stallion. TikTok sounds are more than “just” sounds; TikTok sounds are cultural capital. In the case of Encanto, content made on TikTok migrated off the platform, becoming viral video memes on other social media networks like Twitter and Instagram. And then, with Encanto’s digital footprint still widening, it began to creep into offline spaces. Trending songs from the film on TikTok influenced the music charts (“We Don’t Talk about Bruno” topped the Billboard Hot 100), Disney+ streaming, cinema box offices, the Disney theme park experience, high school dances, Halloween costumes, and even my high school classroom, where “We Don’t Talk about Bruno” became catnip for my students.

Encanto is a movie, but it’s also a musical. And at the heart of a musical is its score. Encanto’s score is catchy and the themes are universal, making it easy to connect with. It resonates with a wide range of people. Children, teenagers, adults, you name it—many of us fell victim to Lin-Manuel Miranda’s earworm of a score, at the heart of which is the story of the Madrigal family’s so-called miracle, their encanto. With each social media post, Encanto fans engaged with the dramaturgy of the film, using the music as a launching pad for virality. The popularity of “We Don’t Talk about Bruno” demonstrates “how music has become creative material for social storytelling on TikTok,” a phenomenon that takes place even in videos lasting a few seconds. Notably, multiple parts of “We Don’t Talk about Bruno” were popular on TikTok,

\[1\]Kai Riemer and Sandra Peter, “Encanto, TikTok and the Art of Social Storytelling: Why Music Is Not Just for Listening Anymore,” Conversation,
making the entire song a meme in and of itself. Given how the song features a plurality of voices and performers, there is a corresponding multitude of stories that TikTokers can tell using the sound bite. Viral #BrunoTok content ranged from dance challenges and lip syncs to cosplay and impersonation, not to mention TikTok trends finding humor in the song’s lyrics and staging (e.g., Mariano’s walk in Isabela’s “He told me . . . ” section of the song).

Encanto’s virality may have begun in digital spaces, but digital cultures have offline, analog effects. Even people who aren’t on a specific social media platform are inevitably influenced by that same platform. As such, Encanto’s social media miracle illustrates the complex ways that social media informs popular culture, far beyond virtual spaces. The digital is, indeed, part of the real world. Take, for instance, Kate Bush’s 1985 song “Running Up That Hill (A Deal with God).” The song became the sleeper hit of summer 2022 after being prominently featured as a plot device in season four of Stranger Things. The song dominated TikTok, experienced a radio resurgence, and unexpectedly emerged at the top of the Billboard Hot 100 music charts.2 Suddenly people who had never seen Stranger Things nor joined TikTok were listening
