

Making a *Fun* Home: The Performance of Queer Families in Contemporary Musical Theater

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ABSTRACT: This essay examines the performance of the queer family as presented in the Broadway musicals *Falsettos* (1992) by William Finn and James Lapine and *Fun Home* (2015) by Jeanine Tesori and Lisa Kron. While both musicals feature idealized non-traditional models of the family with queer individuals as crucial agents of their formation, *Fun Home* questions rather than affirms the actualization of this ideal through the critical engagement on stage with issues of performance and performativity. In so doing, the article traces a bigger trajectory of historical moments in queer thinking from the 1980s until the present moment that verges back and forth between optimism and pessimism as well as relational and non-relational understandings of sexual identities.

KEYWORDS: Musical Theater, queer theory, performance studies, the American family, *Fun Home*, *Falsettos*

Onto the Stage: Queerness in Musicals

In 2013, during his second inauguration, President Barack Obama spoke to the U.S.-American public stating that “the most evident of truths—that all of us are created equal—is the star that guides us still; just as it guided our forebears through Seneca Falls, and Selma, and Stonewall.” With this conscious choice to mention an overt queer issue for the first time in an inaugural address, Obama’s speech act put the so-called “gay liberation movement,” which had its national watershed moment at the Stonewall Inn on Christopher Street in 1969, on par with civil rights causes of racial and gender equality. By alluding to the Declaration of Independence, he furthermore connected all three historical events back to the promises of the American founding document. With the takedown of the “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” policy in 2011 and the Defense of Marriage Act in 2013 those promises finally seemed achievable up to the point that the emergence of a seemingly national, yet academically contested, confidence in a so-called “Queer Liberalism” was observed by a number of queer studies scholars (Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz).¹

¹ As they write, “the emergence of ‘queer liberalism’ marks an unsettling though perhaps not entirely unexpected attempt to reconcile the radical political aspirations of queer studies’ subjectless critique with

Already years before queer issues took center stage in national politics, American musical theater witnessed the emergence of queer issues on Broadway in the musical *Falsettos* (1992). William Finn and James Lapine's sung-through musical opened on April 29, 1992 at the John Golden Theatre. While certainly not the first Broadway musical to portray gay and lesbian characters openly on the American stage (a feat made possible by Mart Crowley's non-musical play *The Boys in the Band* in 1968), it may be counted as the first musical that reaches a maturity of queer performance not hitherto attained by the earlier "gay musicals" *La Cage Aux Folles* (1983) and *A Chorus Line* (1975), both of which rely heavily on essentialized and essentializing notions of gay identity and to a certain extent alienate, commodify, and isolate their queer characters for/from a mainstream audience (Clum, *Still Acting Gay* 217-20; *Something* 185). Finn and Lapine's *Falsettos* defied such "I am what I am"-moments and made sexuality not its governing principle but a complex intersectional component that plays into the inter-relationships of the characters in various ways and is deconstructed rather than affirmed.

In terms of subject matter, *Falsettos* focuses on a nuclear Jewish-American family in 1979 consisting of father (Marvin), mother (Trina), and child (Jason) that becomes enlarged in the first act by the addition of the father's new same-sex lover (Whizzer) and his psychiatrist (Mendel), who ends up marrying Marvin's then ex-wife; in the second act, set two years later in 1981, the family is further expanded by Marvin's friends and neighbors, a lesbian couple consisting of Dr. Charlotte, a woman internist, and her partner Cordelia, a kosher caterer. The growing pains and complications as well as the pleasures following this shift from nuclear to patchwork family are at the heart of the musical.

Growing pains are also the point of investigation in a musical about another queer family living in the late 1970s: The Bechdel family portrayed in *Fun Home*, a musical by Lisa Kron and Jeanine Tesori which opened on Broadway at the Circle in the Square Theatre on April

the contemporary liberal demands of a nationalist gay and lesbian U.S. citizen-subject petitioning for rights and recognitions before the law" (Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz 10). More specifically, queer liberalism must be critically viewed despite its advances in civil rights for LGBTQ individuals for its exclusionary and normative tendencies and frequent privileging of white middle-class masculinity, which especially in the domain of this article, i.e. commercial Broadway theater, is a powerful narrative.

19, 2015. *Fun Home* is based on Alison Bechdel's award-winning graphic memoir of the same title from 2006, in which she revisits her childhood with the retrospect knowledge that, as the musical version of Alison states: "My dad and I both grew up in the same small Pennsylvania town, and he was gay, and I was gay, and he killed himself, and I... became a lesbian cartoonist" (Kron and Tesori 17). The musical thus engages with the interrelation of memory and queerness and the performative dimension of these concepts presented through a daughter's quest to understand the (inter)relationship with her deceased father.

Dealing with stage performances from a queer studies perspective, as this study does, entails thinking about performances on multiple levels. On the one hand, there is the stage performance which is constituted by actors and audience in the space of the theater and which, in everyday language use, comes close to the regular use of the word 'performance' as a theatrical event; the actors perform their roles quite obviously and candidly in a performance that the audience has agreed to sanction, understand, and consume *as a* performance and, crucially, *not as* 'real life.' A crucial benefit of this type of performance is that, because of its "pretend"-nature, it allows for testing or challenging socio-cultural boundaries. On the other hand, there is exactly the kind of performance that poses as 'real life' and tries to hide its theatrical mechanisms/dimensions in order to uphold so-called "regulatory regimes" that aim to uphold the status quo (Butler, *Imitation* 308).² When this paper talks about a performance or uses the verb 'to perform,' or the adjective 'performative,' it will do so, unless indicated otherwise, with reference to the latter kind of performance. Socio-cultural performances are as much at the heart of performance studies as they are at the heart of queer studies, which has been investigating queer identities as performances at least since the publication of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* in 1990. In this theoretical conception, as Butler writes, "identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (34). Hence, an act that is perceived to be an expression of an identity, e.g. when somebody is waving an American flag patriotically at a

² I do realize that this dualistic distinction presents an oversimplification of what performances can be and that, on top of this, one cannot always distinguish clearly between these two types. Nevertheless, I choose to make this distinction in order to give my readers an idea of where I am headed with the concept of performance, which is always more in the direction of the second understanding, and to avoid redundant explanations and annotations.

sports event, in truth “produce[s] the effect of an internal core” (185), which in this example would be that of a patriotic, sports-loving American citizen.

Such performances, however, can only function if they are intelligible to their audience and must thus draw on a set of societal and cultural norms from which they are bound to cite their signifying raw material. Performativity thus means to denote the process whereby an identity is continuously shaped through the repetition of citational processes, i.e. reproductions, from these cultural norms (Butler 191). A man, for instance, needs to repeat behavior that is already associated with masculinity in a specific cultural context in order to be, or more precisely, to become a man; being a man is performing (or *doing*) masculinity according to cultural conceptions of manhood. The subversive potential behind this epistemological shift lies thus not in an anything-goes kind of identitarian approach that lets anybody be who they want to be, but rather in the uncovering, questioning, and undoing of the construction of identity itself (Butler 201-202). In the theoretical context of this paper, the performance of queer families—i.e. the performance of the families within the musicals by the characters intradiegetically—will be put under scrutiny with regard to their subversive potential as citational formations that use stock elements of traditional (American) families to uncover their constructed/performative nature on the one hand, and to trouble the notion of these nuclear families as the original of the ‘other.’ The means of the stage performance in the theater of the musicals *Falsettos* and *Fun Home* will be taken into account inasmuch as they contribute to this performative, subversive endeavor.

What this paper thus argues is that *Falsettos* offers a strong critique of the neo-liberal idea of sexually queer individuals as enemies of the family and instead positions them as crucial members of a healthy and happy family. As I will also try to show, however, *Falsettos* emphasizes a process of coming together and healing whereas this optimism for a queer utopia is only present in *Fun Home* on an escapist level and gives way to an emphasis on failed communication, disruption, loss and negativity that in turn calls into question the progressive notions of *Falsettos* and of a queer liberalism in general.

Making a Home – *Falsettos* against the Pro-Family Movement

After the opening number of *Falsettos*, its protagonist Marvin, alone on the stage, steps forward for his first solo, an “I-Am/I-Want song.” This type of song is typical for the genre of the Broadway musical and, according to Bob Fosse, “define[s] [his] character and situation” (qtd. in Stempel 414). Marvin tells the audience the following: “Well the situation’s this—/It’s not tough to comprehend:/I divorced my wife,/I left my child/And I ran off with a friend” (Finn 12). This is all the information on “the situation” that the audience gets from him; neither is there a mentioning of a cause or any justification for his decision to leave his wife and son, nor is the gender of this “friend” specified. This latter omission, linguistically significant since he has left his female spouse for a male lover, precludes an interpretation of his queerness as the reason for leaving her. Hence the essentialist, causal relationship between his actions and an inner gay core as the origin of his actions is reversed: rather than leaving Trina because he is queer, he is read as queer in hindsight because he leaves Trina for Whizzer. With such a reversal of cause and effect, the musical from the very beginning opts for a performative understanding of sexual identity as espoused by Judith Butler, which understands homosexuality not as the all-encompassing definition of an individual and refutes stable identity categories such as gay or straight because of their proneness to be(come) “instruments of regulatory regimes” (Butler, *Imitation* 308). Marvin thus escapes such regimes by flouting sexually normalizing language.

Readings of homosexuality along essentialist lines were culturally prevalent in the 1970s and 80s, the time-frame that *Falsettos* is set in. They first helped queer individuals to establish a political identity and unified movement for the advocacy of rights and positive representation in American society. With the turn of the decade, however, these favorable developments came to a crashing halt, triggered by two incisive events of 1981: the outbreak of the AIDS epidemic in the United States on the one hand, and the inauguration of President Ronald Reagan on the other.

Reagan’s conservative “New Right” politics labeled itself as a “pro-family movement.” The pro-family movement, as Tina Fetner explains, can be described as “a group of social movement organizations that share both wide-ranging conservative political agenda and a

(primarily evangelical) Christian identity” (423) and emerged in the 1970s after an “era of retreat from secular politics” (424) from the 1930s through the 1960s. During this time, these religious groups tried to build an alternative world for their children to shield them “from what they perceived to be immoral secular influences” such as “popular music [...] as well as the sexual content of magazines, films, and television” (424) and managed to establish an influential and far-reaching network. When the movement emerged from seclusion and into secular politics, one of the two watershed campaigns to establish it in the public eye was former Miss Oklahoma Anita Bryant’s 1977 crusade against gay rights entitled “Save Our Children.” In her reasoning, children are at a high danger of being turned into homosexuals by homosexuals since “homosexuals cannot reproduce” and therefore “must recruit the youth of America” (qtd. in Fetner 425). This specific agenda as well as conservative positions on sex education, on anti-discrimination bills for LGBTQ individuals, or on women’s rights issues such as abortions or the right to access emergency birth control are the trademarks of this pro-family movement that President Reagan hitched his political agenda to in the name of saving the traditional American family.

Hence, as historian John D’Emilio notes in his essay “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” “lesbians, gay men, and heterosexual feminists [...became] the scapegoats [...for the lack] of happiness and emotional security” in the family (473). This perceived lack of family cohesion, D’Emilio explains, did not, however, stem from advances in queer civil rights issues, as some conservative voices such as Bryant would have it, but should rather be seen as the outcome of a long process of transformation that gradually turned the American economy into a capitalist wage-labor system from the end of the 19th century onward. D’Emilio writes that “capitalism weakens the bonds that once kept families together” and at the same time enables a survival of the individual that is not “structured around participation in a nuclear family” (473; 470). In the emerging capitalist system, having a family became optional in terms of survival, a fact which loosened the ties between family members that had governed the rigid structure of the nuclear family in the 19th century. This transformation, in turn, can also be linked back to the emergence of the social construct of “the homosexual”:

Only when individuals began to make their living through wage labor, instead of as parts of an interdependent family unit, was it possible for homosexual desire to

coalesce into a personal identity—an identity based on the ability to remain outside the heterosexual family and to construct a personal life based on attraction to one’s own sex. (D’Emilio 471)

Read together with social interactions like those that Michel Foucault lists in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*—namely “[t]he medical examination, the psychiatric investigation, the pedagogical report, and family controls”—the capitalist processes that D’Emilio identifies lead to the historical formation of a homosexual identity (45). Along these lines, both *being* homosexual and *being* single in the sense of a culturally legible identity only become possible as effects of a wage-labor system that undoes the economic necessity of family structures. Hence, according to D’Emilio, conservative ideologies of the 1970s and 80s commit a crucial error in their historical reasoning. Instead of acknowledging that homosexuality and looser family ties are effects of the same historical process, i.e. the rise of capitalism, they blame one symptom as the cause of the other.

The same anxieties about an erosion of the nuclear family are expressed *ex negativo* through Marvin’s opening solo in *Falsettos*: “But I want a tight-knit family./I want a group that harmonizes./I want my wife and kid and friend/To pretend/Time will mend/Our pain” (Finn 12). Marvin is afraid that his family will fall apart in the wake of his eloping with Whizzer. Via the byway of conservative anxieties about the nuclear family he thus offers an entry point for such audiences into the topic of a patch-work family. Marvin closes off his first solo with the ultimate capitalist mantra “I want it all” repeated four times in a musical climax (Finn and Lapine 12). This marks him as a prototypical product of the so-called “Me Generation” of the 1970s who are, as musical theater historian John Bush Jones argues, concerned first and foremost with their own happiness (336). Viewed from this perspective, his first solo comes across as an ignorant, self-centered demand that fits not only the selfishness of this generation but also summons the image of a family patriarch in line with a pro-family movement. Even though he has upset his family, Marvin wants them to “pretend” that nothing has changed. It is doubly interesting here that, judging from the semantic value of the lyric “pretend,” he is either merely interested in keeping up the appearances of a happy family while in truth everybody is miserable, or that he strikes a more critical note about how families, especially happy ones, are always an “act,” a “show,” a “performance.” Both

interpretations, however, point to Marvin's patriarchal egocentrism, which is subsequently challenged throughout the first act. The first challenge comes from his new lover Whizzer, who refuses to act like a "good housewife" and to follow suit to Marvin's patriarchal demands. Trina's echoing of these demands during her relationship with Marvin, set to the same musical accompaniment highlights how Marvin repeats this pattern of dominance regardless of the gender of his romantic partner (Stempel 663):

MARVIN (to WHIZZER):

Whizzer's supposed to always be here,
Making dinner, set to screw.
That's what pretty boys should do.
Check their hairlines, make the dinner,
And love me.

[...]

TRINA (at the psychiatrist's)

I was supposed to make the dinner,
Make it pretty on his plate.
Every wife should pull her weight.
Have it ready, make it tasty
And love him. (Finn and Lapine 47)

It is Marvin's patriarchal and masculinist demand that hinders the formation of a happy family, not his sexual orientation. When he is left alone by his ex-wife and lover at the final curtain of act one, the only relationship he can salvage is the one with his son Jason. These ruptures bring Marvin to reconsider his egocentric demands and to see the error of his ways. By the beginning of act two, which is set two years later in 1981, he has reconciled with his ex-wife and made arrangements that he can see his son on the weekends. Later still, he reunites with his former lover Whizzer in a now equal partnership, a change that is mirrored in the lyrics. While Marvin started out at the beginning of the show by singing "I want it all," he now reverses his mantra to tell his lover "All I want is you" (Finn and Lapine 147). It is thus implied that what was wrong in his previous relationships was not his sexual queerness but the oppressive tendencies of a family patriarch. Only in giving them up, that is, only by performing differently, can he establish the connections necessary for a functional family. While Marvin's abandonment of patriarchal notions makes the coming together of the patchwork family possible, it is the non-biological family members who initiate this process

and bring it to fruition; this process finally reaches its climax at Jason's bar mitzvah with the entire enlarged family present.

The three biological members of the father-mother-son family at the center of *Falsettos*, Marvin, Trina and Jason, cannot agree on the party planning for the son's bar mitzvah. Marvin and Trina bicker and argue about every last little detail and when the following exchange occurs, Jason steps in to stop the fight:

MARVIN:
Blame her.
It is all a waste.

TRINA:
Look at your couch, it is homo-baroque.
Don't talk to me about taste.

JASON:
Stop! I don't want a bar mitzvah! (134)

At this conversational dead end, Trina's new husband Mendel jumps to the rescue with the humorous song "Everyone Hates His Parents," which offers not only comic relief to Marvin and Trina's argument but also a deconstruction of the traditionalist adoration of one's biological parents:

MENDEL: (*To JASON*)
Everyone hates his parents.
Don't be ashamed.
You'll grow up,
You'll come through,
You'll have kids
And they'll hate you too.
Oh, everyone hates his parents,
But I confess,
You grow up,
You get old,
You hate less. (135)

By the end of this song, Jason not only joins in singing Mendel's lyrics, but also imitates and then joins Mendel in his choreography. The number ends in a high-five between Jason and his step-father. This exchange of affection establishes Mendel as an important parental

figure who is able to help Jason grow up, especially and significantly in situations where his biological parents fail.

Marvin's on-and-off lover Whizzer, the other non-biological family member, also integrates himself into the family in the second act, in which he attends one of Jason's Little League baseball games. While the other family members are hardly supportive of Jason, since they repeatedly and exasperatedly—and for comedic effect—state that they are “watching Jewish boys/Who cannot play baseball/Play baseball” (Finn 112), Whizzer shows Jason how to swing the bat correctly. He thus performs the function of the stereotypical sports dad who is able to pass on to his son the necessary knowledge for succeeding in the (sports) world. With this action, Whizzer disrupts intersections of both stereotypical notions of male sexual queerness as unmanly on the level of gender and contemporary conservative views on the potential of queer individuals as parental figures and as enemies of the family. This disruption of stereotypical discourses surrounding gender and sexuality is mirrored musically in Whizzer's song. During the game, he comes to lead the chorus in the same way and with the same words that he uses to instruct Jason:

WHIZZER:

Keep your head
in the box
Don't think
of a thing
Keep your head
in the box
Your eye
on the ball

OTHER SPECTATORS:

Keep your head in the box
Don't think of a thing
Keep your head in the box
Your eye on the ball

ALL:

Take a breath,
Then let it out and swing (Finn and Lapine 117)

Whizzer's leading the other family members in instructing and supporting Jason is a performance that turns him into a leading figure for the family, which is underlined musically by the call-and-response structure of the segment. The fact that his connection to Jason is not biological (and since Whizzer and Marvin are separated at this point, the connection is not even sanctioned through a connection with the biological father) therefore becomes

irrelevant for the formation of family ties. Hence it can be argued that Jason and Whizzer's strong parent-child bond, which brings Whizzer to the baseball game and thus back onto the family scene, also brings Marvin and Whizzer back together romantically. This bond is also not news to the audience. Since the first act, when Jason is semi-forced by his divorced parents to go see a psychiatrist, the strong-willed youth will not listen to his parents and instead proclaims "I wanna speak with Whizzer" (Finn and Lapine 44). His father's lover is the only one who has enough of a connection to the boy to convince him to go. That Whizzer shows up at the baseball game in act two is also due to their connection, which becomes clear when Whizzer sings that "Jason asked me to come./Since he asked me to come, I came" (114). In this manner, Anita Bryant's public campaign *for* children and *against* homosexuals of the 1970s is debunked in this 1990s musical from a child agent's perspective.³

When Whizzer then falls sick and is hospitalized with an unknown disease (AIDS is not named until late in 1981), instead of narrating the prevalent social isolation of gay AIDS victims during the Reagan administration, the musical uses the strong connection between Jason and Whizzer to effect a family union. After hesitating about whether he should agree to a bar mitzvah if Whizzer cannot be there, Jason comes up with the idea to perform the ritual in Whizzer's room at the hospital. This decision finally resolves the disagreements between the family members that came up during the planning period.

Before the ceremony takes place, another non-biological bond is struck, this time between Whizzer and Marvin's ex-wife Trina. While displaying a critical, at times verging on the homophobic and certainly jealous attitude towards her "ex-husband's ex-lover" for most of the musical, Trina is having a change of heart when Whizzer is taken to the hospital (114). In a solo song that functions as a soliloquy, delivered in the space of Whizzer's room but with the curtains drawn around his bed, she admits that she is "[t]rying not to care about this

³ This turning to the Child as a figure of reconciliation and futurity from both conservative right wing and liberal left wing politics would serve as another example for the cult of futurity that Lee Edelman outlines in his polemic *No Futures: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004). In it, Edelman argues that any political argument points to a future that in turn is symbolized by the figure of the Child in a culture that takes a reproductive heterosexual logic as its framework; homosexuals, in such a logic, become identified with a future-negating impetus that, as Edelman argues with concepts from Lacanian psychoanalysis, is actually inherent to all cultural participants in the form of the death drive.

man who Marvin loves,” but concludes immediately afterwards and in a musical climax that “that’s my life./He shared my life./Yes, that’s my life” (148). Trina thus comes to realize that the curve-ball that life has thrown her way cannot be dodged and that, by trying to do so, she is avoiding rather than living life; Whizzer’s life coming to an end leads her to this epiphany and with the gesture of acknowledging this, she acknowledges his central position in her family and in her life.

When Trina’s new husband and Marvin’s former psychiatrist Mendel finally performs the ritual of Jason’s bar mitzvah in Whizzer’s room at the ward, it is thus clear that the traditional ceremony itself reaches across the aisles of biological and non-biological, heterosexual as well as non-heterosexual, and nuclear as well as peripheral members of a family. With his wording, Mendel starts out to perform a song that represents the family in traditional Judaic terms. He calls Jason a “Son of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,/ Son of Marvin, son of Trina” (Finn and Lapine 170). Soon, however, he performs the traditional Judaic family with a difference when he states that Jason is also the “son of Whizzer, son of Mendel,” and of the rest of the family, including the lesbian couple from next door (Finn and Lapine 170).

Dreams of a *Fun Home*

A similar, yet eventually less optimistic moment of a queer family coming together in a happy union with all its non-biological, non-nuclear members is offered on the Broadway Stage more than twenty years after *Falsettos* in Jeanine Tesori and Lisa Kron’s musical adaptation of Alison Bechdel’s graphic memoir *Fun Home*.⁴ In the book, the lesbian cartoonist, famous for the comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For* (1983-2008), probes into her own childhood family years in rural Pennsylvania and her time at Oberlin college. Bechdel encounters her younger self and her closeted gay father Bruce in the memories she draws on the page and suffuses with her captions; in the one-act musical adaptation, forty-three year old Alison is as physically present as her 9-year-old childhood self and her 19-year-old college freshman self (Small Alison and Medium Alison, as the libretto lists the parts

⁴ The title of the memoir is a family shorthand for the funeral home that the Bechdel family runs. At the same time, it can also be assumed to denote the Bechdel’s actual home, a gothic-style mansion in more respects than merely the architectural. The absurd clash of somber and happy associations already in the title of the book thus sets the stage for the tone of the work (both on the page and on the stage), which is governed by an interplay of light and sinister elements and reflects the memoir’s subtitle: “a tragicomic.”

respectively). As Lisa Kron writes in her foreword to the libretto, the forty-three year old 'regular' Alison is "not [...] a narrator [...] [but] a character, doggedly pursuing a goal," thus moving her character away from that of a detached narrator and into the central conflicts of the play (8). Equally present, apart from the other Bechdel family members, are Joan, Alison's college girlfriend, and Roy, a young local who helps Bruce refurbish the house and is also one of Bruce's semi-secret affairs with various adolescent men.

This new musical, which opened Off-Broadway in 2013 and transferred to Broadway in 2015 took home five Tony Awards including Best Musical, marking the first time in Broadway history that a female duo won in this category.⁵ *Fun Home* is structurally as complex as the graphic memoir it is based on and takes the circular and fragmented form of a memory play, in which scenes from Alison's past and present shift from one to the other and do not follow a chronological order. Lisa Kron adds to this qualification that it is "important to note that the past always understands itself to be the present. [...] This is even true for adult Alison for whom looking back is an active journey forward" (7).⁶

The question(s) at the heart of *Fun Home* circle around 43-year-old Alison's relationship with her deceased father Bruce and can be gleaned from one of the protagonist's "verbal captions" that, on the stage, she verbally signs her memories with: "Caption: I leapt out of the closet—and four months later my father killed himself by stepping in front of a truck" (Kron and Tesori 41). Alison thus wants to trace and understand the connections between her coming out as a lesbian and her father's suicide. Her father's suicide occurred when he was 43, Alison's current age, and thus leads the protagonist to delve deeper into her memory:

⁵ The modifier "new" in a Broadway musical context is not used to denote "recent" or "current" but rather stresses that a production is not a revival. This linguistic specificity points to Stephen Sondheim's observation after the introduction of a Tony Award category for Best Revival of a Musical in 1994 that Broadway theater, much like society at large, is turning more and more into a "recycled culture" (qtd. in Jones 326; Stempel 646).

⁶ In a Broadway context, Tesori and Kron thus continue the line of works that have investigated the past through the ephemeral lens of memory like the defining *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) by Tennessee Williams, or several musicals of Stephen Sondheim, which covered new ground for the musical as a form by using non-linear modes of narration as, most notably, *Company* (1970), *Follies* (1971), and *Merrily We Roll Along* (1981) have done, the latter of which moves backward in time to ask its central and universal question(s): "How does it happen?/When does it disappear?/How did you ever get to be here?"

ALISON.

It all comes back, it all comes back, it all comes back

There's you

And there's me

But now I'm the one who's forty-three

and stuck

I can't find my way through

Just like you

Am I just like you? (Kron and Tesori 11)

This question of crisis haunts the book and the score of *Fun Home*, troubling the normative intersections of being a father/daughter and being queer. Hence both musical citations, i.e. the repeated use of vocal lines or motifs, as well as lyrical/verbal repetitions suffuse the performances of Bruce and Alison Bechdel. As they sing individually and shortly after each other, both “can’t abide romantic notions of some vague ‘long ago’” and strive for a clearer access to the past “to know what’s true, dig deep into who/and what and why and when,/until now gives way to then” (11-12). These latter lines are sung in unison, one octave apart, except for the last line. Here, the melody lines depart so that father and daughter sing in close, yet also conflicting harmonies in the same octave, landing on a dissonant major second one whole tone apart on the word “then.” The resulting dissonance is then resolved by Alison who moves up two steps on the word “then” from G4 to B-flat, creating a perfect fourth harmony that is more pleasing and harmonious to the ear than the original major second. It is thus Alison who strives for harmony and reconciliation with her father and ends up being the one having to adapt. The significance of her adapting to her father on the word “then,” which denotes the past, points to the central conflict that Alison is going through, namely coming to terms with her past and trying to change it or her position towards it. Throughout the play, the relationship between Alison and her father is accompanied musically in variations of harmony and dissonance, sameness and difference, which alludes to the sexual difference (difference to the norm of heterosexuality) that the sameness of homosexuality (in the sameness of the gender of partners) symbolizes and that Bruce and Alison Bechdel share.

On the surface level, however, there are fewer things that father and daughter have in common than the ones they do not: Small Alison is more interested in cartoons than in the high literature her father teaches to High School students and resists her father’s attempts

at dressing her like a girl. She does not understand her father's attachment to antique objects, nor his obsessive desire to renovate their family mansion to spick-and-span condition.⁷ Finally, Medium Alison 'confronts' her sexual desires openly and comes out as a lesbian. In contrast, her father has affairs with young men on the side while working hard to keep the facades of both his house and a perfect family intact at the cost of his own and his family's happiness.

As is made clear in the first ensemble song, first by Alison and then repeated by the entire family, the Bechdels resemble a traditional family only at first glance:

ALISON.

Welcome to our house on Maple Avenue
 See how we polish and we shine
 We rearrange and realign
 Everything is balanced and serene
 Like chaos never happens if it's never seen. (Kron and Tesori 14)

As this example shows, Alison and her family are well aware of the chaos and the problems bubbling beneath the surface. This becomes especially apparent at moments when one of these bubbles finds its way up to the surface that they strive so much to perfect in order to give Bruce, their patriarch, whatever "[h]e wants—/[h]e wants—/[h]e wants" (15). One such moment is presented while Small Alison is watching a "Partridge Family-esque show on TV" (Kron and Tesori 46). While a happy family is singing and laughing together in the TV show, her father enters in a sour mood. As we learn from grown-up Alison's commentary, he has been sentenced by a court to see a psychiatrist "on a charge of 'furnishing a malt beverage to a minor,'" or more explicitly, trying to seduce an underage high school student (47). When Bruce's anger at the verdict transitions into a bitter argument with his wife, Small Alison covers her ears and starts singing the jingle of the TV show, which in turn summons up the dream of an alternate and happy Bechdel family. For a moment, this dream comes alive on stage.

Led into song by the imaginary television characters Bobby Jeremy and The Susan Deys who come up through a stage trapdoor and are enveloped in fog the Bechdel family transforms

⁷ Cf. adult Alison's statement: "Caption: Sometimes my father appeared to enjoy having children, but the real object of his affection was his house" (Kron and Tesori 13).

into a happy patchwork family in the mold of the all-singing all-dancing nuclear Partridge Family.⁸ All-together they start singing: “Everything’s all right babe/when we’re together” (Kron and Tesori 49-50). In this fantasy number, furnished in flashy clothes and colorful lighting, Small Alison achieves what cannot be achieved in real life: All members of the expanded family are relentlessly happy and joyfully perform, as actors in a TV series, the same lyrics and the same choreography together to the feel-good sounds of a *funky* seventies TV family, tambourine included. More significantly still, the members of the original Bechdel family are led by the alter egos of three queer characters from the musical – Roy, Medium Alison and Joan. These characters are thus visually and musically included into a positive performance of a nuclear family while at the same time queering such traditional, pop-cultural family structures by the addition of non-biological, queer members.

The opposition of reality and dream are thus queered and the opening lines of the song, sung by the imaginary TV star Bobby Jeremy, underline this reversal: “Today I woke up with this feeling that I did not recognize/ [...] Our happy life seemed far away and everything was made of lies” (49). In the same way that Bruce does not “recognize” a feeling of complete elation, to which his secret queer desires and uncontrolled “burst[s] of agitation” point, Bobby Jeremy and the utopian, imaginary characters do not “recognize” the tightening feeling that Bruce and his family know all too well.⁹ Although coming from opposite directions, both perspectives exhibit the desire to erect a wall of separation between reality and dream, normativity and queerness and simultaneously question its successfulness through the simultaneous presence of real family members in a fantasy setting. This is also reflected in the song’s titular “raincoat of love” that is supposed to “protect” the family members from metaphorical “bad weather” (50-51).¹⁰

⁸ Bobby Jeremy and The Susan Deys are played by the same actors who play Bruce’s affair Roy, Medium Alison, and her college girlfriend Joan. The name for the part of the two Susan Deys is an allusion to the eldest daughter of the Partridge family, whose part was played by actress Susan Deys.

⁹ Towards the beginning of the musical, Bruce has a musical aside that reveals to the audience that there is a forbidden desire in him that he seemingly cannot control any longer: “Sometimes the fire burns so hot/I don’t know what I’ll do” (16).

¹⁰ That this oddly and mundanely poetic title bears a striking phonological resemblance to a “rainbow of love” and thus to the symbol of gay liberation successes of the 1970s adds another layer of queerness to this document of period musical styles.

Before moving on, it is crucial to elaborate on the performative potential of this scene. First of all, the song and the scene stand out to the audience as an immediately recognizable cultural product, namely that of a traditional family in the mold of the Partridge family or at the very least of a happy group of musicians. The Bechdels—or at least the version of the Bechdels that Small Alison imagines—thus use this mold as a citational repertoire for their performance. The audience now has to compensate for the disparity between this new happy family and the family they have so far witnessed on the stage, one that is marked by isolation and secrecy. The previous performance of the Bechdels thus upsets the carnivalesque performance of the “new” and happy Bechdels in Small Alison’s imagination; these two images clash simultaneously in their performance. This in turn calls into question the authenticity of the original Partridge family performance and consequently destabilizes the entire notion of happy families in general.

As quickly as Small Alison’s fantasy has been conjured up, it vanishes again. The stark contrast between reality and fantasy that is thus established rather emphasizes the lack, the disconnects, and the silences of the Bechdel family. It is Bruce who ends the song alone on stage. Almost mechanically, as if to convince himself, he repeats the first part of the chorus, “Everything’s all right...”, three times but cannot make it to the conclusion “when we’re together” (51). The despair and emotional exhaustion of this imagined memory translates to Alison, who tries to distance herself from her own painful past immediately following the song by saying: “It’s only writing, it’s only drawing, I’m remembering something, that’s all” (51).

Contrary to what these “denials” may imply—Bruce denying that he is in despair about his hidden desires and Alison denying the importance of reliving her memories—the fantasy number “Raincoat of Love” occupies a central position in the structure of the one-act-musical. It is placed literally in the middle of the musical and thus in a position that would be occupied by the final number of act one in a regular two-act musical, a spot reserved for a central number both musically and plot-wise. In this vein, the song hearkens back in content and musical style to the seminal “Side By Side”—also the finale of the first act—in Stephen Sondheim’s musical *Company*, in which tropes of togetherness and belonging are used to

highlight the isolation of the central character Bobby, a 35-year-old single in a sea of married couples.¹¹

Furthermore, the scenes that precede and follow “Raincoat of Love” (the ‘happy-family’ number in *Fun Home*) are the ones in which Bruce’s illicit desire for (younger) men most clearly disturbs the fabric of a traditional family. Not only is he being court-ordered to see a psychiatrist after having offered alcohol to a high school junior in a scene directly before the song, he also stays at a friend’s apartment on Bleecker Street in Manhattan with his children but without his wife after it. Since this street is located in the Village and thus at the heart of gay Manhattan, it is not surprising that the real purpose of this trip is described by adult Alison as follows: “Caption: Dad goes out. Dad gets a newspaper. Dad goes... cruising? Dad picks up a hustler? No he didn’t. Maybe he did. I don’t really know. Who knows?” (Kron and Tesori 55). Alison thus tries to follow through in her endeavor to get to know the other, the gay side of her father from her memories. This endeavor, as the uncertainty of her “caption” emphasize, may be a futile one and as unrealistic as her father’s own struggle to lead a “gay” life. In the context of the scenes surrounding the song, “Raincoat of Love” stands thus at the point in the musical’s structure where both Bruce’s and Alison’s desires come to the fore most clearly. On the one hand, its dream-like quality can thus be seen as a continuation of their desires, or even as their apex, and simultaneously as a reconciliation of these desires with Bruce’s family obligations. On the other hand, the contrast between the alternative reality of the TV family and the actual reality of their isolation is all too clearly painted by this climactic production number.

Apart from the argument with his wife and the Bleecker Street cruising incident, there is actually one more scene that can be classified as such an eruption of Bruce’s desire. It takes place, however, not in the middle but towards the beginning of the show when Bruce seduces Roy, the young man he has hired to help him with the house, while his wife Helen is

¹¹ Several readings of *Company* (1970) have conjectured that its protagonist Bobby might be homosexual, an interpretation that was highlighted in 1995 with Sam Mendes’ and in 2006 with John Doyle’s productions, respectively. Both reintegrated a dialogue cut from the original play in which Bobby talks to one of his married friends about their respective homosexual experiences (Stoddart). More recently still, it has been announced that Sondheim is working together with John Tiffany on a version of *Company* “which reimagines Bobby as a gay man with commitment issues and a revolving door of boyfriends” (Champion) and thus brings him even closer to Bruce Bechdel in *Fun Home*.

practicing the piano upstairs (29-32). When Roy is concerned about her presence and Bruce diverts the concern by saying that he should not “worry about her,” the action of the scene dissolves into darkness and Helen’s seemingly innocent piano etude becomes the score for the next, erotically charged chorus (31). In this chorus, the three characters—Bruce, Roy, and his wife—sing a cacophony of musical variations often using the verb “want” in order to express their divergent but coexisting desires in this sexual triangle between wife, husband, and lover. The fact that Helen’s etude, which she initially uses to drown out the sounds of her husband’s adultery both literally and metaphorically, becomes transformed into the leitmotif of this chorus and thus of her husband’s affair speaks to the inescapability of these formally ‘hidden’ desires. Helen wants to ignore her husband’s sexual escapades but can only remain a part of it all, whether she wants to or not. This point is driven home when the desires of the three finally coincide in the chorus on the threefold musical repetition of the words “Me and him,” which constitute the climax and the end of this song (32). Hence, despite the characters’ attempts to escape the consequences of their isolated actions, the audience becomes aware of their interconnectedness and especially of Bruce’s central position in the triangle.

This musical climax is enhanced further still by the three Bechdel kids, who are singing the jingle of their favorite TV series—the one that will also set off “Raincoat of Love”—in an adjacent room and thus join in the chorus revolving around Bruce and effectively turn it into a sextet. In this way, the chorus around Helen’s etude is musically and structurally connected to “Raincoat of Love,” the fantasy song about an all-inclusive happy family at the center of the musical. This points once more to the dire need the family is in to confront rather than run away from their individual desires. At the same time though, there are marked differences between these two family songs, differences that emphasize the dream-like status of the one while cementing the sober realities of the other. For one thing, there is a spatial distribution in the chorus that is dissolved in “Raincoat of Love.” While in the former, Helen is in the music room, Bruce and Roy in the library, and the kids in the TV room, the latter completely dissolves the spatial confinement of the rooms in a house and the stage transforms from a representation of a house into a performance space proper. This literal change of scene is accompanied by a change to disco lighting and the fact that the characters move the piano to the center of the stage. Hence the togetherness of the family

is stressed while at the same time it is made clear that this can only happen in such an otherworldly space in which mundane barriers do not persist. Furthermore, there is a striking difference in choreography. While the chorus features no formal dance choreography and consequently stresses the self-absorption of the family members, Helen with her etude, Roy and Bruce with each other, the kids with the TV set, “Raincoat of Love” uses the same fixed choreography that is stylistically reminiscent of a group participation dance such as, e.g., the hokey pokey or the Harlem Shake—to cite a more recent example. This type of dance brings with it an everybody-can-do-it quality and an ease that the Bechdels so painfully lack at other points in the musical, especially when it comes to being happy together.

Dreams in a Time Gone By

As has been shown, *Falsettos* (1992) and *Fun Home* (2015) engage with significant Broadway musical trends and stand as examples of a tradition that tries to reconcile and further develop the queer strivings of both the musical and American culture. In general, the Broadway musical has been engaging with the mores and traditions of the American people from its very beginnings towards the end of the 19th century and it has always been its project to tell American stories on the American stage. As musical theater historians such as John M. Clum and Stacy Wolf have pointed out, this project, especially in the musical’s golden mid-century era, has been “thoroughly gendered,” directed at the traditional American family, and—programmatically and rigidly—celebrated “heterosexual romance [as] its very purpose” (Wolf 203). Beginning in the 1970s, the Broadway musical has been able to express a queer sensitivity on the stage that, according to playwright and performer Harvey Fierstein and many others, “was always in the theater” (qtd. in Stempel 662). Especially in terms of the American family, the two discussed musicals offer a radical critique of 1980s discourses that positioned queer individuals as the enemies of the family. In contrast to these homophobic representations, the musicals offer potent and multivalent performances of American families that are at times and alternately more idealistic and more realistic and posit subversive critiques of prevailing models of the family at the same time.

In *Falsettos*, the patriarchal and heterosexual structures of a family model rooted in pro-family notions of the Reagan era are challenged subversively and prominently by queer and non-biological family members and an alternative model is drawn up that reaches its climax in the onstage performance of a traditional Judaic coming-of-age ritual in queer terms. In *Fun Home*, the devastating toll of conforming to rigid, traditionalist models of the family is played out in the relationship of Bruce and Alison Bechdel who both struggle with depression as a result; the possibility, or rather the dream of a patchwork-family is indicated and performed in the central “Raincoat of Love” in an alternative reality and thus upsets notions of the traditional family on the one hand and attests to the impossibility of this dream rather than to its fulfillment. Both *Falsettos* and *Fun Home*, though more than twenty years apart, could thus be said to support the same ideal of a happy patchwork family; the difference between the two being that *Falsettos* believes more optimistically in the realization of this ideal whereas *Fun Home* acknowledges its dream-like status and expresses a more skeptical attitude towards the attainment of that dream.

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