

ONCE MORE WITH CHUTZPAH! – A CELEBRATION OF JEWISH COMPOSERS

By

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Abstract

It is well known that many of the most influential American composers have been Jewish—George and Ira Gershwin, Stephen Sondheim, Leonard Bernstein, Irving Berlin, just to name a few—and it is my responsibility as a Jewish-American actor to honor their legacy and celebrate my heritage—keeping one foot in the past and one foot in the future. To honor these musical theatre composers, I, along with fellow Musical Theatre major Jenna Meadows, created a cabaret-style performance that highlighted their works, while at the same time exploring our own experiences as American Jews studying musical theatre. Our performance was made public via the School of Theatre, Film, and Television’s online streaming platform, in an effort to both educate and entertain both the Tucson community and any nationwide audience members that tuned in. Our performance also raised an awareness of the negative impact that COVID-19 has had on the theatre community, since many theatres have faced the unfortunate risk of permanent closure due to the pandemic. We provided viewers with a link to donate to the National Yiddish Theatre Folksbiene in New York City—a theatre that works to honor and maintain Jewish tradition by producing works entirely in Yiddish.

Link to Recorded Performance

<https://vimeo.com/540920493> (Password: Shalom!)

Group Members

Antonio Luis Moreno III: organizing materials, writing the script, researching composers, scheduling rehearsals, audience outreach
Jenna Amelia Meadows: organizing materials, writing the script, researching composers, scheduling rehearsals, correspondence with tech crew

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FULL SCRIPT

Song: “Shalom” from *Milk and Honey* by Jerry Herman (duet)

T&J: Shalom! Welcome!, etc.

T: Thank you so much for coming out tonight! I’m Tony...

J: And I’m Jenna. We are so excited to present our honors thesis, titled:

T: Once More with Chutzpah!

J: A Celebration of Jewish Composers.

T: We’ve spent this past academic year researching and creating tonight’s performance with the intent of highlighting the works of Jewish composers while diving deep into our own lives as American Jews studying musical theatre.

J: Now, I want you to think of your favorite showtune. Chances are, it was written by a Jew.

T: The Gershwins?

J: Jewish.

T: Berlin?

J: Jewish.

T: Bernstein?

J: Jewish.

T: Sondheim?

J: Jewish.

T: Schwartz?

J: OKAY, okay, we get the idea. Every song you’ll hear tonight was written by a Jew, like our opening number, “Shalom,” which was written by Jerry Herman for the musical Milk & Honey.

T: Fun fact about Milk & Honey: It was the first ever musical written about Israel, which was a relatively new nation at the time of the musical’s conception.

J: Another composer you may have heard of is Leonard Bernstein.

T: Oh, right!! He did that one show... uh... what’s it called again?

J: West Side Story?

T: Yeah! West Side Story! Which was originally going to be East Side Story and would have focused on the struggles between Eastern European Jews and Irish Catholics in NYC at the turn of the century. Maybe Bernstein thought that would’ve hit too close to home... he did refer to himself as a “chip off the old tanakh.”

J: Bernstein didn’t write the lyrics, though. That job was given to the young Stephen Sondheim, who actually famously dislikes a lot of the lyrics he wrote for the show. Imagine being Sondheim and disliking your own lyrics...

T: Imagine being Sondheim... (begin music)

T: Together they created a masterpiece that forever changed the landscape of American musical theatre.

Song: “Something’s Coming” from *West Side Story* by Leonard Bernstein and Steven Sondheim (Tony solo)

Song: “Love Walked In” by George and Ira Gershwin (Jenna solo)

J: That was “Love Walked In” by George & Ira Gershwin, arguably the most famous writing team to come out of Tin Pan Alley.

T: The brother duo wrote some of the most well-known hits at the time, including the quintessential American anthem, “Rhapsody in Blue.”

J: Tin Pan Alley was chock full of other up-and-coming Jewish composers trying to make it, like Irving Berlin, Jule Styne, and Sammy Cahn.

T: (cue) Year-round, they released song after song, and it only made sense that when winter came along, they decided to “cater to the masses”—

J: —no pun intended—

T: —and write some Christmas music. (begin music)

Song: “White Christmas” by Irving Berlin (Tony solo)

(the following dialogue is underscored)

J: Who wrote that one, Tony?

T: Irving Berlin! He was inspired by Southern California’s warm winters compared to the frigid Holiday Season up North.

J: You know another Jew who wrote one of the most famous Christmas songs of all time?

T: Who?

J: Robert Wells!

Song: “The Christmas Song” by Robert Wells (Jenna solo)

Song: “Let it Snow” by Sammy Cahn and Jule Styne (duet)

J: And that last song was by Sammy Cahn and Jule Styne, who were probably playing a rousing game of dreidel while writing it.

T: Jokes aside, Christmas was a major part of my life growing up. My Dad is Catholic, my abuela is very Catholic, my girlfriend is Catholic, and my family celebrates both Christmas and Easter every year.

J: What’s your very Jewish-sounding full name again?

T: Antonio Luis Moreno el Tercero...

J: Oh, yeah, that name is definitely Kosher. Yeah, I’m fully Jewish, but somehow less Jewish than Tony. I often feel like I’m not Jewish enough. I was the only kid in my family not bar/bat mitzvahed, and I only went to one year of “Hebrew School,” which wasn’t even really Hebrew School! It was an after school program taught by my 2nd grade teacher—if you stayed after class, she would read you a couple o’ bible stories.

T: I didn’t have to go to Hebrew School because I went to a Jewish elementary school, so I was always surrounded by Jews. Most of my friends were Jewish, and as a result, all of my “middle school romances” were Jewish. It was a breath of

fresh air when I met Maya, a Catholic, in high school. We have been in a relationship since Junior year. She was stage manager for a bunch of the shows I did in high school, including The Last Five Years, written by Jason Robert Brown...

J: ...another Jew!

T: JRB is known for sprinkling little nods (or sometimes BIG nods) to Judaism in his work. As a proud Jew himself, his work often reflects his own Jewish experience... such as his first time dating a non-Jew (or Shiksa, as we like to say in Yiddish). (begin music) I think he would agree when I say that having a non-Jewish girlfriend spices things up a bit and gives me a new perspective on things. I sometimes wonder what our families think, though...

Song: “Shiksa Goddess” from *The Last Five Years* by Jason Robert Brown (Tony solo)

Song: “I Could Be Jewish For You” by Nikko Benson (Jenna solo)

J: As I’m sure you all know, the pandemic has greatly impacted the theatre industry, putting many theatres across the country at risk of shutting their doors to audiences forever.

T: One of these struggling theatres that we care deeply about is the National Yiddish Theatre Folksbiene in downtown Manhattan—the longest continuously producing Yiddish theatre company in the world.

J: They present plays, musicals, concerts, lectures, interactive educational workshops and community-building activities in English and Yiddish. NYTF serves a versatile audience of approximately 100,000 individuals annually, comprised of performing arts patrons, cultural enthusiasts, Yiddish-language aficionados and the general public, while also using the arts as a vehicle to educate youth and adults about Jewish heritage.

T: With your help, this theatre can continue in their mission to keep important stories alive.

J: After this performance, please feel free to visit their website at nytf.org, where you can learn more about all the amazing things they do and become a part of their mishpacha (family) by donating if you are able. We would really appreciate it.

*T: One of their more successful productions in recent years was an all-Yiddish production of *Fiddler on the Roof* by Bock & Harnick.*

*J: *Fiddler* is about a Jewish community that stays true to their “tradition” despite anti-semitic attitudes of their country’s leader and the people outside their close-knit village of Anatevka. (begin music)*

T: In spite of a renewed negative attitude against Jewish people, communities, and synagogues in this country, I have never felt prouder to be a Jew and to stay true to those “traditions” that have existed for centuries.

Song: “Do You Love Me?” from *Fiddler on the Roof* by Bock and Harnick (duet)

Song: “Beautiful City” from *Godspell* by Stephen Schwartz (Tony solo)

T: That was “Beautiful City” from Stephen Schwartz’s Godspell...a musical about Jesus written by a Jew. And, yes, I’ve played Jesus... twice.

J: Stephen Schwartz has written quite a few biblical works. Other than Godspell, he wrote the music for The Prince of Egypt and Children of Eden.

T: Wait, Jenna, there’s something we’ve yet to discuss...

J: Proper challah braiding technique?

T: No... Female composers and lyricists!

J: Come to think of it, I can count on one hand the number of Jewish female composers and lyricists that I know: Jeanine Tesori, Lynn Ahrens, Lucy Simon...

T: Goldrich & Heisler?

J: Oh yeah! Goldrich & Heisler! I love those ladies! I relate to them so much.

Zina Goldrich said that growing up she was “culturally Jewish, but didn’t go to Synagogue...” Like me! I also relate to a lot of their music. In addition to the Jewish thing, we also got the female thing in common, and I appreciate hearing songs about women actually written from a female’s perspective, (begin music) exploring emotions such as love, desire, and fear.

Song: “Welcome the Rain” by Goldrich and Heisler (Jenna solo)

T: I know that song is very metaphorical, but it’s so dry in Tucson that I literally welcome the rain whenever it does rain here.

J: (to audience) See? Guys just don’t get it.

T: Get what?

J: Forget I said anything.

T: No, what!? Tell me!

J: Nothing!

T: Wait, pause. This bickering reminds me of every large family gathering I’ve ever been to.

J: Ugh, you and me both.

T: When my liberal grandfather brings up politics with my conservative uncle? Fuhgettaboutit. That’s when I take a few rugelach up to my room and eat them in peace and quiet.

J: Mmm... I make the best rugelach. Filled with dark chocolate.

T: Um... No. I make the best rugelach. Flaky, light, sprinkled with nuts.

J: You’re wrong. (being music) I can make rugelach better than you.

T: No, you can’t.

J: Yes, I can.

T: No, you CAN’T!

J: YES, I CAN!

Song: “Anything You Can Do” from Annie Get Your Gun by Irving Berlin (duet)

J: That was “Anything You Can Do I Can Do Better” from Irving Berlin’s first book musical, Annie Get Your Gun.

T: Ya know, considering the fact that Annie Get Your Gun was his first “situation show,” it’s pretty darn good.

J: I mean, does it surprise you that it's good? George Gershwin called him the greatest songwriter who ever lived, and Jerome Kern said that "Irving Berlin has no place in American music, he is American music."

T: All of these composers really were trailblazers in the history of American musical theatre.

J: There have even been some well-known Jewish pop artists that have ventured into the world of musical theatre.

T: Like Barry Manilow (!), who joined forces with Bruce Sussman to write Harmony, a musical that takes place in Germany just as the Nazis rise to power. In writing his musical, Manilow was inspired by the idea that tolerance is the best way to fight tyranny, and that the decisions we make today (begin music) can have lasting effects on our futures.

Song: "Every Single Day" from *Harmony* by Barry Manilow & Bruce Sussman (Tony solo)
Song: "I Have Found" from *The Royal Family of Broadway* by William Finn (Jenna solo)

J: That was "I Have Found" from William Finn's Royal Family of Broadway.

T: William Finn is a heavily autobiographical writer, often discussing his own Jewish experience in contemporary America.

J: Royal Family of Broadway, first workshopped in 1998, tells the story of a girl from a family of great Broadway actors who contemplates leaving show business and getting married.

T: The show had its first full production in 2018 at the Barrington Stage Company in Pittsfield, MA, where Finn is co-founder and artistic producer. You spent your summer there two years ago, right, Jenna?

J: Yes, actually, funny story... You know how they always say, "don't meet your idols..." well... (insert story)

T: Maybe if you had said "Shalom" instead of "Good Morning" it would have ended a little differently...

J: I guess we'll never know. (awkward silence)

T: Alright, moving on!

J: Thank you all for coming out and supporting us, both in person and online.

T: Before we end tonight, we need to thank a few people without whom this would not have been possible.

J: First and foremost, our accompanist and musical director, Jamie Reed.

T: We'd also like to thank our thesis advisors, Hank Stratton and Danny Gurwin, who helped us put this show together from start to finish.

J: And, last—but CERTAINLY not least—our wonderful tech team: Chris Mason on lights, and Max Baines & Michael Tellez on sound.

T: Also: the Arizona Arts tech team, Cy, Dal, and Dane. We'd also like to thank the Honors College and the College of Fine Arts for giving us a platform to bring this to fruition. (begin music)

J: Well, Tony, what's next?

T: Well, we are graduating in a few short weeks.

J: REEEEE! I can't believe the time has finally come.

T: Yep, and I'm a little scared of what's to come—the unknown.

J: I'll admit, I'm a little scared, too, but I think I'm ready. I think we both are.

Song: "Move On" from *Sunday in the Park with George* by Stephen Sondheim (duet)

(bows: "Shalom," followed by...)

Encore: "This is Not Over Yet" from *Parade* by Jason Robert Brown (duet)

Artist's Statement

Putting together a show from start to finish was an incredibly fulfilling experience. It is not common—nor is it a requirement—for musical theatre students to be responsible for the creative and production aspects of a show. Bringing an idea from off the page and onto the stage was an invaluable opportunity as a musical theatre student. Likewise, it was personally fulfilling to create an evening of theatre with a theme that hit very close to home. Personalizing each song and making it work in the given context was great creative practice—the final product was crafted through trial and error. I'm very proud of what Jenna Meadows and I created; it was no easy feat.

Our process began with a question: How can we make a cabaret personal, interesting, and cohesive? We landed on one of our shared identities: Judaism. I knew that many of musical theatre's greatest composers were (and are) Jewish. I *didn't* know the magnitude with which Jewish composers dominated the industry. Our preliminary list of composers was almost forty-strong. It would have been impossible to highlight that many composers in an hour-long cabaret, so we decided to focus on the following composers—composers that we felt had the greatest impact on American musical theatre: George and Ira Gershwin, Irving Berlin, Robert Wells, Sammy Cahn, Jule Styne, Leonard Bernstein, Stephen Sondheim, Jerry Herman, Jerry Bock, Sheldon Harnick, Stephen Schwartz, Barry Manilow, William Finn, Zina Goldrich, Marcy Heisler, Nikko Benson and Jason Robert Brown. In researching each composer, we made sure to focus on their Jewish identity and how it influenced their work. With our research completed, we then began to craft our cabaret.

Creating the “flow” of a cabaret is a difficult task. There are a few issues we ran into: showcasing one performer more than the other, “ballad gridlock” (which can put audience members to sleep), and creating personal and interesting dialogue (without making it seem like we were lecturing the audience). After some shifting of songs, tweaking of lines, and the addition of jokes, our script was complete.

Rehearsals were very much a collaboration between Jenna, me, our thesis advisors, and our music director. It was a unique experience, however, to take the reins and create the performance with minimal guidance from our advisors. Our final product was very much a reflection of who we are as people and as performers, and I believe that our blood, sweat, and tears could be felt in our performance.

In the weeks prior to the show, it was our responsibility to gather a proper tech crew composed of lighting and sound designers. With a generous scholarship from the Honors College, we were able to increase our budget and procure the greatest tech team we could have asked for. Our lighting and sound design were both accomplished with College of Fine Arts students, and they transformed a boring white tent into a classy cabaret venue.

We performed our production of *Once More with Chutzpah!* on April 24th at 7:30 P.M. Due to COVID-19 protocols, we were only approved for a distanced in-person audience of about twenty. As such, we opted to stream our performance through the School of

Theatre, Film, and Television's online streaming website, so those who couldn't attend in person had the opportunity to watch. The week leading up to our performance, we launched an aggressive social media campaign to try and spread the word about our cabaret, creating a Facebook event and sharing the streaming link on all available platforms. Our turnout exceeded expectations. In addition to the twenty-something audience members in person, we had an online turnout of upwards of one hundred viewers, which was far greater than we had anticipated.

The evening was a culmination of not only my Honors Capstone but also my University of Arizona career—it was my final time taking a bow while a student in the musical theatre program. It was a very special evening, and audience reception was overwhelmingly positive. We achieved what we set out to do: educate, entertain, and share a part of who we are. This was an undeniably fulfilling experience, and through it I grew both as a performer and a human.