

“Look Who’s Evil Now!” Violence in Canadian Musicals

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Abstract: The genre of musical theatre began as an American form of light music-drama—mostly romantic comedies with music. However, music can be added to any literary or dramatic genre, and when more serious subjects are tackled in musicals, themes such as violence that have long been present in other media are explored in new ways. This paper examines instances of violence in four Canadian musicals: Billy Bishop Goes to War (1978), Jacob Two Two Meets the Hooded Fang (1983), The Shooting of Dan McGrew (1983) and Evil Dead: The Musical (2003).

Musicals are often viewed as lighthearted fare with accessible stories and music.¹ Most stories are comic, rather than tragic, and happy endings are nearly universal. While many scholars who care about the genre have nuanced and problematized the interpretation of musicals (Swain 2002; Block 1997; Steyn 1997; Knapp 2005), the popular opinion that musicals are “light” works that never attempt the tragedy of grand opera remains. However, there are exceptions to the general optimism and gaiety within the genre; even stories that feature upbeat chorus numbers and end happily can contain complex characters and plot twists that involve violence, tragedy and death. This article explores instances of violence in Canadian musicals—violence that occurs in isolated plot points, in marginalized characters, and as a more general theme.

Violence

Opinions vary on what exactly constitutes violence or violent acts. Violence is often associated with passion or an intense emotion that causes the desire to hurt some person or thing. For the sake of this paper, I use violence as an umbrella term that includes physical, psychological or emotional attacks,

aggression, or any destructive act. Virginia Held describes violence as “the predictable, coercive, and usually sudden infliction of injury upon or damage harming persons” (1996:187). She cautions that definitions of violence “should be kept primarily descriptive rather than normative” (ibid.) pointing out that there can be cases of justifiable use of violence in self defense and in the enforcement of many laws. Held’s definition is inclusive in that she does not specify whether the injury or damage is physical, hence we may conjecture that her concept of violence could also apply to verbal or psychological violence. Tomas Munro makes explicit the inclusion of non-physical violence in his definition. He expands a standard definition of violence, stating, “Violence can also be mental or verbal. It can be caused by natural forces, as in a thunderstorm. Among humans, violence can be individual, as in an isolated crime, or collective, as in a riot or revolt. It can be legal or illegal, and opinions differ as to its moral rightness” (Munro 1969:317). The morality of violence is often explored in court cases and inquests, with varying judgments from legal systems in different times and places. Lowry and Rankin claim, “popular attitudes about violence are substantially influenced by cultural values and biases” (1972:613). Following on from them, one must view violence in its cultural context, and see both real life violence and the fictional depictions of violence in the media as reflected and constrained by the culture from which they sprang.

Since the advent of mass media, there has been moral concern that violent images, both real and fictional, may be making our society more violent. The United States Congress has funded study after study in order to determine if the violence we see in the media is a reflection of our culture, or if, more insidiously, it could be the part of our culture that is making us more violent.² In Jeremy Earp’s documentary *The Mean World Syndrome* (2010), media critic George Gerbner noted that the widespread nature of mass media means “there is a relentless and pervasive exposure to brutality many times a day.” He states that children see about 8,000 murders in the media by the end of elementary school and about 200,000 violent acts by the age of eighteen. Gerbner states that “it is the routine nature of this violence that makes it so dangerous and so different from the past” but he concludes that the effect of this exposure to violence does not make us more violent, it makes us more *fearful*. Heavy television viewers are more afraid of being the victims of violence, “for all practical purposes, [they] live in a meaner world” (Earp 2010). The question of whether and how to censor violence in the media in order to reduce children’s exposure to it is handled by organizations like the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in the United States, and the

Motion Picture Association-Canada (MPA-C) and the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council (CBSC) in Canada.³

Tom Pollard chronicles the censorship of Hollywood films and notes, “different codes encourage different heroes. As codes change, so do the protagonists and villains” (2009:5). Movie directors look for ways to subvert the codes and new codes are written as societal attitudes toward sex and violence evolve. Pollard comments that, while both sex and violence draw audiences to theatres, violence is often a better financial bet for movie producers because anti-sex censorship is much harsher than anti-violence censorship: “Filmmakers long ago discovered the allure of graphic violence and learned to include images of murder and mayhem in order to sell more movie tickets as early as 1900” (2009:7). In the world of live theatre, violence has also long been an allure for audiences. In his examination of violence in Shakespearean plays, Jonas Barish defines violence as “the infliction of physical pain or injury by one person on another, often with the implication of excessive force, so that one might think of poisoning someone’s drink as less violent than shooting or stabbing him, even if the end result—death—were the same in both cases” (1991:101). Barish describes a spectrum of violence, with more overt physical violence outweighing more subtle forms of violence. His definition may be geared toward theatrical, rather than real-life violence—in most scenarios one can imagine, an audience would react more dramatically to gory, brutal violence than to witnessing a character measure out poison. Vicious physical violence more explicitly reveals a character’s emotions by externalizing the internal forms of violent psychosis. Since dramatic forms seek to portray emotions clearly to an audience, it makes sense that many playwrights and directors *show* the audience the results of anger or rage.

Thomas Gould believes that violence is often necessary for tragic drama, and he fears the politically correct impulse that would censor gratuitous violence. Gould theorizes a dichotomy between essential and gratuitous violence, stating, “violence is called ‘gratuitous’ if it appears to be stuck on for its own sake or if it is presented as a shocking injustice, injustice entirely uncompensated for, either by later restitution of justice or by the splendid behaviour of the victim” (1991:1). While he does not bother arguing for the type of gratuitous violence that is “stuck on for its own sake,” Gould argues that you cannot entirely do away with gratuitous violence, because it would mean censoring many great tragedies like *King Lear*. The point of gratuitous violence in such a tragedy is its senselessness—a comment on the human condition and the unfairness of life. The compensations that Gould mentions—a “restitution of justice” or the “splendid behaviour of the victim” (*ibid.*)—alters the dramatic form from tragedy to melodrama on the one hand (such as action films where

the death of the villain is cheered by the audience), and sentimental stories on the other. Gould believes there are very few stories that are enhanced by a turn toward the sentimental:

the sounding of a sentimental note at the end of a serious drama signals a retreat from tragedy, a fear of depressing the audience. Several of Dickens' best novels are *spoiled* in this way, as are many Broadway and West End plays, also films made in Hollywood and elsewhere. (1991:3. my emphasis)

This backing away from tragedy is, in Gould's eyes, a form of pandering to the audience, and he mentions the big commercial pop culture bastions of the serialized novel, West End/Broadway shows and Hollywood films as guilty of tempering their depictions of violence with sentimentality. Here Gould makes a high art (tragic) versus popular art (sentimental or melodramatic) distinction, that (with some caveats) we can use to interrogate how violence is depicted in musicals.

Violence in Musical

In the case of musicals, violence usually occurs within the constrained boundaries that delineate the world of musicals from the real world. Musical, as theatre pieces, are able to reflect reality, but they also present utopian (or more rarely, dystopian) worlds through artificial conventions such as chorus numbers and torch songs. The music acts to heighten and reveal emotions that would perhaps go unspoken in a play. The appeal to audiences' emotions is what Gould (following Plato) would call "pandering," yet the effect on the audience is usually more complex than emotional manipulation through music. As Raymond Knapp explains, "the effect of adding music to a dramatic scene that might otherwise play naturalistically serves to exaggerate its content, adding a dimension of artificiality at the same time that it often also strives to tap into a deeper kind of reality, one accessible only through music" (2005:12). Knapp argues that the suspension of disbelief when watching actors burst into song is tempered by the ability of music to tap into emotions that are indescribable but intensely real. What Knapp calls a "mode of dual attention" (*ibid.*) allows the audience to see both the mask and peer behind it, forging their own path of interpretations.

With music communicating intense emotions to the audience, it seems that the dramatic power of violence to communicate anger, fear or wrath is

less needed in musicals. It is also possible that producers of musicals felt less need to utilize violence as a draw for audiences because they were less constrained than their movie colleagues in using sex; with no production code office to censor their output, the sensuality and risqué nature of many Broadway musicals ensured large houses and box office receipts, without recourse to depictions of violence. Pollard notes that after the Hays code came into effect in 1934,⁴ Broadway musicals were considerably tamed down for their film versions. Scantly clad chorus girls and stage vixens like Mae West were covered up and cleaned up; “filmmakers learned to substitute double-entendre dialogue, virtuoso performance scenes, and elaborate staging in order to compensate for the reduced sensuality of the characters” (Pollard 2009:60). Hollywood codes limited onscreen sexuality but could be downright permissive of violence, which may have led to film directors choosing violence over sex for uncensored shock value. Broadway directors did not have to make such a choice, and with a focus on romance in musical stories, sex has been a means of selling tickets from the *Ziegfeld Follies* (1907) to *Spring Awakening* (2006).

In comparison to sex, violence is relatively constrained in stage musicals. In conventional musicals, acts of violence are usually only committed by the villain(s) of the story, what Jim Lovensheimer calls the musical “outsider” (2008:205). Thus, in *Oklahoma!* (1943), the character of Jud is both an outsider to the community of farmers and cowboys and also a violent man whose passion for Laurey both attracts and repels her. Knapp examines the character of Jud in both *Oklahoma!* and its source material, the Lynn Riggs play *Green Grow the Lilacs*. Knapp argues that the violent tendencies of all the male characters in *Green Grow the Lilacs* were distilled for *Oklahoma!* into the character of Jud, “an enemy dispatched with comparatively less trauma” (2004:81). With Jud and his threat of violence out of the way (in the melodramatic form described by Gould, where the violent perpetrator meets with a violent end) Laurey and Curly can achieve their happy ending. *Oklahoma!* thus conforms to the generic conventions of American musicals by punishing violent characters, also implying that only outsiders to the established culture or community are capable of violence.

While *Oklahoma!* was groundbreaking for its time, it also helped to solidify some of the conventions about violence and outsiders in musicals that were later upended. Lovensheimer (2008) argues that Stephen Sondheim creates musicals that are entirely populated by outsiders. Many of these outsiders resist communal laws and customs by acting out violently. Sondheim’s *Assassins* (1991) is an imagined world in which all of the people who attempted or succeeded in assassinating an American president come together to form their own community. Lovensheimer notes that although non-conforming outsiders

have long held a prominent place in American literature, “American musicals have generally avoided them” (2008:205). Musicals have a history that is rooted in musical comedy, and tend to follow the same generic conventions as romantic comedy films, with the addition of music. Therefore, the true tragedy that Gould endorses is seldom found in the genre, and violence is rare and vilified. When tragic operas are transmuted into musicals, the sentimental ending derided by Gould seems an inescapable part of the story’s conversion (i.e., Mimi returning to life at the end of *RENT* when the original ending of *La Bohème* left her for dead). In an attempt to break down perceived barriers between genres, Stephen Sondheim and many composers and lyricists writing musicals in the last part of the twentieth century and up to the present, have overturned musical conventions and reconceived musicals to leave acts of violence unresolved.

Many of the conventions of American musicals have also been questioned and upended by Canadian writers as they attempt to put their own spin on an American genre. Sondheim was able to draw on violent events in American history when he wrote *Assassins*, but Canadians have far less violence in their history, no civil or revolutionary wars, stricter gun controls and shorter prison sentences than in the United States, and no death penalty since 1976.⁵ Canadians also like to think of themselves as a peaceful nation, and, since Lester B. Pearson won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1957 for the establishment of the United Nations Emergency Force, as a nation of peacekeepers.⁶ The last war on Canadian soil may have ended in 1814, but Canada has been involved in wars elsewhere in the world and is not free from violence at home. Canada has neither a Sondheim nor a history of assassins, so it may be hard to imagine a Canadian musical that addresses violence in the same way. Canadians are relatively new at creating musicals; in an interview early in his career, Canadian composer Jim Betts noted, “what we’re dealing with here is an American art form. And no matter who creates it or what form it’s in, we’re really still learning how to do it” (Mietkiewicz 1987:E3). Canadians also have a history of approaching violence differently than Americans, and this is reflected in the type of stories that are told. Knapp contends that American musicals are frequently devalued for the very reason that they are immensely important to Americans: they tell American stories (often without reference to Europe or attempts at universality) and mirror to American audiences their traditions, heroes and villains (2005:4). Canadian musicals do the same for Canadians.

Most of the musicals produced in Canada are imports from Broadway and London’s West End, so there is a lack of Canadian content and stories on musical stages. Professional Canadian companies only rarely mount home-grown musicals. In fact, many Canadians would be hard-pressed to name even

one Canadian musical. Our best-known musical is *Anne of Green Gables* (1965) by Norman Campbell (music and lyrics), Elaine Campbell (lyrics), Don Harron (book and lyrics) and Mavor Moore (lyrics), based on L. M. Montgomery's quintessentially Canadian children's novel. *Anne* is mounted every year at the Charlottetown Festival in Prince Edward Island and its enduring success helped garner national and international attention for Canadian musicals. *Anne* is one of the earliest and most successful Canadian musicals, but the genre certainly did not die out for Canadians after 1965. As Canadians began creating their own versions of this American art form, Canadian stories were told that revealed some of the differences between our nation and our neighbour to the south. And a surprising amount of violence emerged from a country whose citizens pride themselves on their politeness and their peacekeeping.

In what follows, I will examine violence in four Canadian musicals that span twenty-five years: *Billy Bishop Goes to War* (1978); *The Shooting of Dan McGrew* (1983); *Jacob Two-Two Meets the Hooded Fang* (1984); and *Evil Dead: The Musical* (2003). The first three musicals have explicitly Canadian stories and themes in addition to a Canadian creative team. If Canadians have a classic musical apart from *Anne*, it is surely the modest *Billy Bishop Goes to War*. One of the first musicals from our country to gain international renown, and perennially popular within our own borders, *Billy* deserves a monograph unto itself. The violence in *Billy* roots the audience in the real history of World War One. In contrast, the other three stories are fictional and I have chosen them in order to show how the musical creators adapted distinct literary genres to the stage, dealing with the violence inherent to the stories differently in each case. From real life conflict (*Billy Bishop Goes to War*) to narrative poetry (*The Shooting of Dan McGrew*) to a horror film (*Evil Dead: The Musical*) to a children's tale (*Jacob Two-Two Meets the Hooded Fang*), Canadian composers and lyricists have gone beyond the romantic comedy origins of the genre and have made musicals of stories that resonate with Canadians despite, or perhaps because of, their violence.

Jim Betts

Jim Betts is an Ontario-based composer and playwright who has been a creator and advocate of Canadian musicals for more than three decades. Perhaps his best-known work is *Colours in the Storm* (1989), based on the life, death and work of artist Tom Thompson of the Group of Seven. Betts is aware that Canadian musicals are, "largely unknown and too often completely unavailable to non-professional companies" (Betts 2005), so he has worked to rectify

this lack of awareness by publishing collections of sheet music from Canadian musicals entitled *Field of Stars* (2004; 2008b). His nationalism is evident in the choice of subject matter for his musicals and in his self-appointed position as curator of the history of Canadian musical; he has said, “I take pride in telling Canadian stories to Canadian audiences” (Betts 2008a:4).

Betts’ music is not easy to track down. It is not available for sale, even through the website for Canadian musicals which Betts himself moderates.⁷ There are no published scripts, scores or recordings of his shows. The scores and scripts exist, of course, as his musicals continue to be remounted. The Cape Breton University Drama group mounted *Jacob Two-Two* in May 2010, but if any recordings exist, they are bootleg copies of the live revivals. Betts’ publisher can be contacted for print-on-demand access to the piano/vocal scores, so the printed music can be tracked down. However, this is clearly miles removed from the usual type of merchandise available as show tie-ins for big American musicals. The limited availability of Betts’ musicals may be due to their relative obscurity. Music from *Billy Bishop Goes to War* and *Evil Dead: The Musical*, which are also examined in this paper, were comparatively easy to find, perhaps because they have had success outside of Canada, on and off Broadway.

Although the music for *Jacob Two-Two* and *Dan McGrew* were not easily accessible, Jim Betts himself was immensely helpful. I contacted the composer via email and he responded, “People are doing papers on Canadian Musical Theatre? The world may end!” (personal communication, May 6, 2010). He was then delighted to send along the scripts, and was responsive and engaging. Betts takes pains to make his work Canadian by choosing overtly Canadian topics and themes: the life of Tom Thompson; a Robert Service poem; and a Mordecai Richler story.

Jacob Two-Two Meets the Hooded Fang

Jacob Two-Two Meets the Hooded Fang is the Richler children’s story that was developed into a musical for the Young People’s Theatre by Richler, Dennis Lee, Philip Balsam and Jim Betts in 1984. It won the Chalmers Award and the Dora Mavor Moore Award for best new revue or musical in 1984. The show closely follows the 1975 Richler tale of a youngest child who is “two plus two plus two years old” (Betts 1984:1) and says everything twice in an effort to make himself heard. Jacob is condemned for his so-called “crimes” against adult culture and is sentenced to Slimer’s Isle, domain of the Hooded Fang. This is a show performed by and to a mixed group of adults and children, so

the violence in this play is typical of children's stories. The heroes and villains are both exaggerated and fantastical. Ken Chisholm, in a review of the Cape Breton production in May of 2010 stated that the musical "shows how children perceive authority and how big people need to be aware of kids' perception of that" (Chisholm 2010). The onstage adults are menacing and often threaten violence, but there is never any doubt that Jacob, the children and Child Power shall prevail.

The threat that the adults present is the threat to the fun of childhood. The character Mr. Fox takes vicious pleasure in removing puzzle pieces from jigsaw puzzles and taking the batteries out of toys that should have batteries included; his petty actions ensure that children everywhere will be unhappy with their toys. The Fang's henchmen, Master Fish and Mistress Fowl, threaten to feed the imprisoned children to the crocodiles, hang them by their thumbs for a week or two, or beat them to a pulp if they misbehave. Their promises of violence toward children may be frightening to younger audience members, but it is of an exaggerated, sometimes comedic type that has very little to do with reality. The musical presents fantastically warped adult figures that revel in the power they exercise over the children. The violence alluded to in the musical has very little to do with real life child abuse or neglect. Jacob is a character trying to negotiate the puzzling world of adult rules, and as he makes his way, he discovers that he and the other children have their own agency. Indeed, there is a recurring pop-inflected song about "Child Power," first sung by Jacob's older siblings, but then including Jacob, as he discovers his own strength.

The Hooded Fang is full of the most menace of all the adults, but, as a review of the 2003 Toronto production notes, he is also "ferociously funny. . . with a hint of *Austin Powers'* Dr. Evil" (Berketo 2003). By the end of the musical, the Hooded Fang has his teeth pulled by Jacob, who reveals him to be just as fun-loving and childlike as the children he imprisoned to be his friends. The song "Mean Machine" is used to introduce the Hooded Fang and is gruesomely funny.

I told you once
I told you twice
The Hooded Fang
Is not very nice.

Who wrestles grizzlies, and gargles gasoline?
Who treats his enemies like squished up plasticine?
Whose smelly socks'd make a hound dog scream?

Whose barbed wire breath'll give you bad, bad dreams?
 Whose little hug'll make you chicken supreme?
 Whose ugly face'll knock 'em dead on Halloween?
 Who sleeps with skeletons and wrestles wolverines?
 Who's got the meanest little mind that you ever did see?
 Well he's a lean clean mean machine
 He will take you by the neck and he will break it clean

He's a mean, mean, mean machine
 Anyone'll betcha
 That the Hooded Fang will getcha
 Cause he's mean! (Betts 1984:27).

It is clear that children's poet Dennis Lee, author of *Alligator Pie*, *Jelly Belly* and lyricist for *Fraggle Rock* and the movie *Labyrinth*, had a hand in the lyrics of this song. Although the line "He will take you by the neck and he will break it clean" is undoubtedly murderous, it is tempered by talk of smelly socks and the repetition of the word "mean." Like the word "nice," "mean" is a relatively mild descriptor and indicates the vocabulary of a child. The musical language of the show is likewise mild and child-friendly; it does not contain many dissonances or minor modalities that most modern ears have come to associate with suspense and the anticipation of violence when it accompanies audio/visual media. The score is a mix of vaudeville, gospel and pop styles with the addition of some jazz when Paul McQuinlan played the Hooded Fang in 2003 and added an extra dimension to the character by playing saxophone in the show. The violence and menace that adults pose throughout *Jacob Two-Two* is imaginative, but mild, and is eventually completely neutralized by Jacob's realization that the Hooded Fang's misguided imprisonment of children is predicated upon his wish that he were still a child himself.

The Shooting of Dan McGrew

Three years before *Jacob Two-Two* made its debut, Betts formed a group of Canadian musical theatre people – christened the Group of Several – to workshop new Canadian musicals. The group worked with amateur actors and musicians in order to keep costs down, but some of the musicals went on to be mounted by professional companies. One of these musicals was by Betts, with a book by John Bertram, *The Shooting of Dan McGrew*. It was performed by the Edmonton Theatre Network in 1983 and was based on the famous Robert Service poem

of the same name. The poem narrates a shootout in a Yukon saloon:

A bunch of the boys were whooping it up in the Malamute saloon;
 The kid that handles the music-box was hitting a rag-time tune;
 Back of the bar, in a solo game, sat Dangerous Dan McGrew,
 And watching his luck was his light-o'-love, the lady that's known
 as Lou.

...

The music almost dies away ... then it burst like a pent-up flood;
 And it seemed to say, "Repay, repay," and my eyes were blind with
 blood.

The thought came back of an ancient wrong, and it stung like a
 frozen lash,

And the lust awoke to kill, to kill ... then the music stopped with
 a crash,

And the stranger turned, and his eyes they burned in a most pec-
 uliar way;

In a buckskin shirt that was glazed with dirt he sat, and I saw him
 sway;

Then his lips went in in a kind of grin, and he spoke, and his voice
 was calm,

And "Boys," says he, "you don't know me, and none of you care
 a damn;

But I want to state, and my words are straight, and I'll bet my
 poke they're true,

That one of you is a hound of hell ... and that one is Dan McGrew."

Then I ducked my head and the lights went out, and two guns
 blazed in the dark;

And a woman screamed, and the lights went up, and two men lay
 stiff and stark.

Pitched on his head, and pumped full of lead, was Dangerous Dan
 McGrew,

While the man from the creeks lay clutched to the breast of the
 lady that's known as Lou.

(Service 1907:50-54)

The musical took some of the unanswered questions of the poem (why was Dan McGrew shot? And who is the "lady known as Lou?") and attempts

to answer them. Bertram and Betts constructed a tale with some of the classic conventions of Westerns, including a lot of poker, greed and gunplay. It is essentially a frontier story, set in Dawson City during the 1897 Klondike gold rush, filled with stock characters of good, bad and dangerous men and women. The sense of time and place in the musical is aided by the score, which is filled with music reminiscent of late nineteenth-century Canada. There are folk ballads and honky-tonk piano settings that bring to life the “rag-time tune” in the poem, and give the characters a musical language based in historical fact.

The violence of the poem is made harmless by the plot twist at the end of the musical and an operetta-like resolution that includes a daughter being reunited with her long-lost mother, an engagement, bags of gold and a rousing chorus. Most notably, the two deaths in the Service poem turn out to be deceptions in a long con that sees the villain taken to jail by a bumbling and stereotypically Canadian Mountie. The musical thus tacks an epilogue onto the poem that changes the very nature of the story’s outcome and allows for a *dénouement* that is in keeping with traditional musical conventions.

Despite the happy ending, the violence and threat of violence throughout the musical is very much present. Most English-speaking Canadians in the audience would have heard the Service poem at some point—perhaps in elementary school, or Guy Lombardo’s 1949 song—but even if audience members were unfamiliar with the poem, the fact that Bertram and Betts retained the title “The Shooting of Dan McGrew” for their musical prepares the audience that the main character will be shot at some point in the show. Bertram and Betts thus conform to and defy the expectations of their audience. They play with the expectations of what happens in the poem against the expectations of what normally happens in musicals. When the poem’s story has the upper hand, the mood is darker and there is palpable threat by and to the characters. Conversely, when musical conventions win out over the dark melancholy of the poem, there is humour and happiness.

It is noteworthy that when the poem is narrated in its entirety near the end of the show, it is spoken rather than sung. The stage directions indicate, “a special underscore accompanies the rest of the sequence. The action becomes more stylized” (Betts 1985:102). The poem is thus acted out as well as narrated – blending the performance traditions of narrative oration with dream ballets common to the musicals of Rogers and Hammerstein. Like a dream ballet, this set piece reveals the motivations and emotions of the characters, allowing the action to move forward with more clarity once the sequence has finished. The underscoring riffs on the “rag-time tune” (Service 1907:50) of the poem, before slowing to a more dream-like, balletic variation and giving way to silence so that the sound of the shots and screams are thrown into sharp

relief. More than any other piece of music in the score, this underscoring succeeds in building suspense and preparing the audience for the acts of violence. The rest of the show continues without any underscoring as the dialogue becomes more frenzied and all is eventually revealed. The show ends as many musicals do, with a final chorus number and a celebration of community. The framework of the musical eventually subdues the violence of the poem. As with *Oklahoma!*, the violence and villainy is reduced to one character who is summarily rejected by other characters, thus restoring (musical) order.

Billy Bishop Goes to War

The evocative power of Robert Service to provide a Canadian sense of place is also found in Act Two of *Billy Bishop*, when the stage directions instruct the actor to declaim the poem “The Dying of Albert Ball” in the manner of “a Robert Service poem” (Gray 1978:77). *Billy Bishop Goes to War* was written by John Gray with Eric Peterson in 1978 and is based on the life of Canadian World War One flying ace Billy Bishop. It is designed as a two-person show; in the original production, composer John Gray played the piano and sang some of the songs while Eric Peterson acted the part of Billy and all seventeen other roles in the show. Peterson utilizes a narrative, story-telling style that is strongly tied to the Robert Service tradition.

Billy Bishop Goes to War opened at the Vancouver East Cultural Centre in 1978 and then toured around Canada, eliciting rave reviews and the interest of Mike Nichols, taste-maker on Broadway at the time. The show went to Washington D.C. in the spring of 1980 and opened on Broadway in May of that year. It was a critical success, but the good reviews did not translate to ticket sales. Gray and Peterson were surprised that the show was so well received by the conservative press. Gray said,

In America, when you address a subject such as war, you’re either for it or against it. And when your hero is a military man, he is either a good guy or a bad guy. So when it came to *Billy Bishop*, which does not address itself to the issue of whether or not war is a good thing or a bad thing, we became pro-war by default. As a result, to the liberal press, we were bad guys, a disturbing har-binger of violent things to come.” (Gray 1978:vi)

In Canada, Bishop was a hero for people of all types and political affiliations, and one of the strengths of the show was that it could be interpreted in

many different ways. The fact that it was interpreted as pro-war in the United States underlined some of the differences between Canada and America at that time. In Cold War era America, with troops returned from Vietnam only five years before, to be seen as pro-war was a death-knell in the liberal Broadway community. The show closed after only twelve performances on Broadway.

The show made an unusual move to an Off-Broadway theatre, but had little success there either. Undaunted, Gray and Peterson took the show to the Edinburgh Festival and had considerably more luck with British audiences. *Billy* continues to be a favourite of Canadian musical theatre, remounted often, including a twenty-fifth anniversary tour with Gray and Peterson resuming their original roles, and a re-envisioned thirtieth anniversary production by Soulpepper Theatre Company.⁸ In the original staging, Peterson was a thirty-two old man writing a speech to recruit troops into the Second World War, and his struggle to find words frames the core of the story in which he recounts his exploits as a World War One flying ace. This framing structure was rewritten for the most recent incarnation in 2009-2011. Peterson is now in his sixties and appears in pajamas instead of a uniform, “Now John and I are the same age the real Billy Bishop was when he passed away quietly in his sleep at the age of sixty-two, and so, it is a Bishop looking back on his life from the end of his life that informs this Soulpepper production.”⁹ In an interview about the same production, John Gray noted, “This is the first time it’s been done by us when our country has been at war, when we actually have young men and women in Afghanistan dying and being maimed. The Canada we are playing to is so much different than it was when we originally did it” (Morrow 2009).

The setting of the First World War and the recounting of trench and air warfare is the violent backdrop of *Billy*. He is a humourous character but also a violent one. Billy tells the audience that as more of his friends and comrades died, he really came to hate the Huns. In a monologue, he says:

You ever heard of “flamers”? That’s when you bounce a machine and it bursts into flames. Now, I don’t want to sound bloodthirsty or anything, but when that happens, it is very satisfying. But it’s almost always pure luck. You hit a gas line or something like that. If you want the machine to go down every time, you aim for one thing: the man. I always go for the man. (Gray 1978:69)

The music that underscores this speech is in a minor key and is a slower, more somber version of the song it leads into, “You Won’t Survive.” Although Peterson lightens the mood of this song by performing as a French cabaret singer complete with boa, the song is a gruesome catalogue of all the ways a

fighter pilot can die; the jaunty rhythm of the music matches its performance but the ostinato of i-iv chords in the left hand of the piano and the minor melody that delays harmonic resolution until the line “you won’t survive,” is more in line with the chilling lyrics. One can imagine a performance of this song sung seriously, without a fake French accent, in a slower tempo—it would be sinister indeed.

In a letter home, Billy writes, “I’m not sure you’d appreciate the blood-thirsty streak that has come over me in the past months. How I hate the Hun. He has killed so many of my friends. I enjoy killing him now. I go up as much as I can, even on my day off. My score is getting higher and higher because I like it” (Gray 1978:72). This is a side of Billy that was little in evidence in the first act, when he recounted his exploits at university and gets the audience laughing about his proclivity for accidents that mostly kept him out of the war. Once he becomes a pilot, he is changed by the deaths around him as well as the people he kills; he becomes a violent man.

A long story that Bishop narrates for the audience as the centerpiece of Act Two, about his single-handed attack on a German aerodrome, is to be told, according to the stage directions, “as a boy might tell a story, full of his own sound effects” (Gray 1978:85). The effect of this type of narrative in one of the climactic moments of the musical is to distance Billy from the violence he wreaks on his enemies and endear him to the audience with his childlike playfulness. Gray punctuates the natural pauses in Peterson’s speech with short sixteenth-note oscillations of a minor second low in the bass of the piano. These musical interruptions are irregular and cannot be anticipated, resulting in building tension that matches Peterson’s mounting excitement in his performance. There are moments of sorrow in the show too, as Billy outlives so many of his comrades and starts to wonder why. The violence and death in this musical is not so easily made into a funny song and dance number because it is based on real people and events.¹⁰ Every plane shot down in Billy’s “score” was a real person that met their end at his hands.

Evil Dead: The Musical

In contrast, to *Billy*, *Dan McGrew* and *Jacob Two-Two*, *Evil Dead* did not use Canadian material as its inspiration – instead, it is based on a series of Hollywood horror films. The films were musicalized by a Canadian team of writers and musicians who wanted to turn Sam Raimi’s cult movie series into a musical comedy about Zombies. Christopher Bond, the director, has stated that the second film, which is as much farce as it is horror, inspired them. He said he,

Frank Cipolla, Melissa Morris and George Reinblatt took the next logical step in taking *Evil Dead* to its ridiculous extreme by having the zombies sing and dance (Katigbak 2004).

The plot of the musical follows five college students who travel to a cabin in the woods for spring break and while there discover the “Necronomicon,” or “Book of the Dead.” One by one they succumb to the Candarian demons that they have awoken by reading aloud from the book. At the end, only the character Ash remains, and to survive he has had to chop up his former friends, sister and girlfriend and must cut off his own hand when it tries to kill him. The classic zombie horror plot is made comedic not only by the singing, dancing and characterization, but by the sheer excess of blood. Each performance uses up copious quantities of fake blood – much of which lands on the first three rows of the audience, what is affectionately known as the “Splatter Zone”.

Evil Dead: The Musical was first workshopped in Toronto in 2003 and opened at the Tranzac Club on the night that the entire eastern seaboard of North America experienced a blackout. The cast and crew moved outside of the club, and with car headlights illuminating the actors, *Evil Dead* debuted in front of paying customers and curious passersby. As the crowd grew, so did the buzz surrounding the production. It played Montreal’s *Just For Laughs* comedy festival in 2004 before being mounted Off-Broadway in 2006 at The New World Stages. The show returned to Toronto in triumph and advertised its return by aligning itself to popular megamusicals with the tagline “it’s like the musicals you love, only evil” (Ouzounian 2008:E3).¹¹ Its run at the Diesel playhouse began in May 2007 and was extended several times, finally closing in June 2008. At 300 performances, it entered the record books as one of the longest running Canadian musicals, and won the Dora Audience Choice Award as Toronto’s Favourite Show.¹²

The violence in *Evil Dead* is so over-the-top as to become comedic. For some reason it is hard to be scared of flesh-eating demons when they sing and dance. In addition, the writers rarely attempt to make the music or lyrics really menacing. When minor seconds or tritones are heard, the threat normally ascribed to these intervals by ears used to decades of horror film soundtracks is lacking, precisely because they have been used so frequently in the scores of horror films. In the musical, the writers expose and ridicule the conventions of horror films and their attendant musical clichés as much or more than they make fun of musical theatre tropes. The violence and the humour are played off one another, as the original director, Christopher Bond, explains: “If it’s just laugh, laugh, laugh, it gets boring. We like to set the tone, and make it a little disturbing, then bam! You’re hit with a tango. That’s the genius of this show” (Katigbak 2004). The

classic horror film set-up is anaesthetized by the humour, music and dancing, not to mention the improbable plot of the musical.

The character Ash sings a power ballad disavowing his natural violent tendencies called “I’m Not a Killer,” but in the course of the song he takes a chainsaw to his girlfriend and co-worker turned zombie. The electric guitar imitates Ash’s vocal line as he sings “die” over and over in an ascending sequence, and both the sound of his voice and the guitar are punctuated by the roar of the chainsaw. Ryan Ward, who originated the character of Ash in 2003 and also played him Off-Broadway, was enthusiastic about both the violence and the humour inherent in a zombie-horror-film-turned-musical: “Just the idea of having a guy singing while he’s sawing up his girlfriend’s head, and her blood spraying into his mouth while he’s singing - how funny is that?” (ibid.).

I’m not a killer
 I’m an S-Mart employee
 And to kill a co-worker
 Is against company policy
 But you tried to kill me
 So now I must say goodbye
 I’m sorry, Linda
 But now you must die. (Reinblatt 2007:24)

Ash is the hero the audience roots for, despite, or perhaps because of, his chainsaw-wielding prowess. The zombies are also made much more sympathetic in the musical than they would be in a horror film because the musical gives them voices. The musical creators acknowledge this, especially in their treatment of a “bit part demon.” In a standard horror film, this demon would have been one of the forgettable hoards that Ash annihilated. However, in the musical, he has an entire second act soft shoe number to sing about his lack of a main role (that is, until he is cut off when Ash shoots him). The other demons also form a twisted community that they want Ash to join. Richard Dyer (1992) argues that conventional musicals show audiences utopian answers to any feelings of discontent they may have with capitalist society. Thus, a feeling of alienation or fragmentation in real life is answered by depictions of community on stage in gigantic production numbers. Musicals from the post-Sondheim era such as *Evil Dead* are part of a generation that cannot quite take musicals seriously. Musical episodes of shows like *The Simpsons* that lovingly mock musical conventions have set a precedent for an intensely self-conscious, ironic approach to the genre; *Evil Dead* is a show that plays with the conventions of both horror films and musicals, and its depiction of community is

likewise unconventional. The community of demons entreats Ash to join them with a large dance number in which they sing about how much fun they have as dancing and singing zombies.

- Scott:** In hell we dance our own special way
Let's show 'em how we dance while our bodies decay
- Linda:** Do we bounce like Backstreet?
- Scott:** Not without a heartbeat
- Jake:** Do we grind like Michael Bivins?
- Scott:** Bell Biv DeVoe be for the living
- Cheryl:** De we whoomp like Tag Team?
- Scott:** Not without a bloodstream
- Ed:** Let's Macarena like that group did
- Scott:** No. That's just stupid
- Deadites:** Deadites always like to get their freak on
And when we get together we do the Necronomicon
Do the Necronomicon
Do the Necronomicon
Come on, come on
and do the Necronomicon
- Scott:** You gotta follow the moves
Right to the letter
It's just like the Time Warp
- Deadites:** What?
- Scott:** Only better. (Reinblatt 2007:26-7)

This song clearly pokes fun at dance crazes, pop music figures, and that other cult monster musical, *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. The New York Times columnist Anita Gates in her 2006 critique of the Off-Broadway production stated that "*Evil Dead: The Musical* wants to be the next *Rocky Horror Show*, and it may just succeed." Scriptwriter Reinblatt and the rest of the creative team clearly anticipated this comparison and integrated their response into the lyrics "It's like the 'Time Warp' only better."

Ash resists the call of the "deadites" to join their community. In order to maintain his own autonomy (and his life) he in fact must eradicate the community by killing all the demons. He is the outsider to the demon community, but the audience is aware that the demons are the real outsiders and Ash is single-handedly (quite literally!) restoring order to the violent demons through his own acts of violence. Ash might be a sad, lonely and blood-covered character after killing all his former friends, but he manages to create a new community

for himself out of the living. *Evil Dead* ends with Ash recounting his exploits to the S-Mart customers who celebrate his demon-slaying prowess with the song “Blew That Bitch Away.” As the liner notes for the cast recording declare: “anytime you’ve blown a bitch away it’s a happy ending” (Reinblatt 2007:15).

With its copious amounts of blood and onstage gore, *Evil Dead* shows more physical violence than the other three musicals, but that is because it is based on a series of horror films where showing violence and gore to the audience is part of the genre’s allure. Each of the musicals follows its own stylistic code in dealing with violence. *Jacob Two-Two* is set in the world of a child’s dream and the threats of violence are the over-exaggerated threats familiar from characters such as the Wicked Witch of the West and Disney villains. *Dan McGrew* takes place in a frontier land of brawls, gunfights and con artists and thus holds the promise of violence in every scene, as the characters follow their own (sometimes dubious) moral codes. *Billy Bishop* is set in the historical past of the First World War, when new modes of fighting such as trench warfare and fighter planes were taking over, placing space between killers and the killed. There are other Canadian musicals that are not as violent, even if they have similar settings, but these four musicals showcase the wide range of violence that can be found in Canadian musical theatre. Together they bring up some interesting questions about the nature of Canadian musical theatre, its themes and its opportunities to break away from the Broadway mould. The supposedly cheery world of Canadian musicals may contain more violence than we realized. 🍁

Notes

1. I gave a version of this paper at the “Spaces of Violence, Sites of Resistance” IASPM-Canada conference at the University of Regina in June 2010. I would like to thank the conference organizers and attendees for feedback.

2. See Murray (1994) for a comprehensive summary of the various studies undertaken to explore the links between media and violence.

3. See the websites of these organizations for further information MPAA: <http://www.mpa.org/ratings> FCC: <http://www.fcc.gov/> MPA-C: <http://www.mpa-canada.org/?q=content/film-ratings-canada> CBSC: <http://www.ccnr.ca/>

4. Although there were production codes in Hollywood prior to 1934, the Hays code was the first organized attempt by Hollywood studios to self-regulate with a list of “Don’ts and Be Carefuls.” See Pollard (2009:49-88) for an in depth examination of the Code and the way it changed the types of films that were produced.

5. See Riendeau (2007) for an overview of Canadian history and the Canadian

government websites on capital punishment http://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/news-nouv/fs-fi/2003/doc_30896.html and gun control <http://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/cfp-pcaf/>.

6. See the Pearson Peacekeeping Centre website <http://www.peaceoperations.org/>

7. The website is <http://northernriver.com> and is dedicated to promoting Canadian musical theatre. The store on the site has both volumes of *Field of Stars* (2004; 2008b) available for purchase, but no recordings or scores from his individual shows.

8. The Soulpepper production was directed by Ted Dykstra and mounted in three successive seasons, 2009, 2010 and 2011. It was made into a film by Barbara Willis Sweete that premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in September 2011, and broadcast for the first time on CBC television on November 10, 2011.

9. Quote taken from the 2011 Summer Playbill for Soulpepper Theatre.

10. See the McCaffery (2002) and the NFB film *The Kid Who Couldn't Miss* for a more detailed investigation into Bishop's life.

11. See images of the "deadified" posters for *Les Misérables*, *Hairspray*, and *Mamma Mia!* on the advertising cache website http://adsoftheworld.com/media/print/evil_dead_les_miserables. See the show's website for a brief history of the various productions. <http://www.evildeadthemusical.com/site/history>

12. See the show's website for a brief history of the various productions. <http://www.Evildeadthemusical.com/site/history>.

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