"Trying to Resurrect People": Musical Theater and Theater for Social Change in Witness Uganda

Emilie Jensen

Colby College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/honorstheses

Part of the Performance Studies Commons

Colby College theses are protected by copyright. They may be viewed or downloaded from this site for the purposes of research and scholarship. Reproduction or distribution for commercial purposes is prohibited without written permission of the author.

Recommended Citation

https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/honorstheses/772

This Honors Thesis (Open Access) is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Research at Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Colby.
“TRYING TO RESURRECT PEOPLE”:
Musical Theater and Theater for Social Change in *Witness Uganda*

Emilie Jensen
Honors Thesis in Theater and Dance
May 15, 2015
# Table of Contents

Introduction: Why Is Making Change So Hard? .................................................................1

Witness 1.........................................................................................................................14

Chapter One: Theater for Social Change ........................................................................15

Witness 2..........................................................................................................................27

Chapter Two: Musicals in Society ...................................................................................28

Witness 3..........................................................................................................................44

Chapter Three: *Witness Uganda* Genesis, Development and Plot ..............................45

Witness 4..........................................................................................................................55

Chapter Four: Social Justice in *Witness Uganda* .........................................................56

Witness 5..........................................................................................................................66

Chapter Five: Reception and Critique of *Witness Uganda* ..........................................67

Witness 6..........................................................................................................................76

Chapter Six: Tactics for Making Social Change in Theater ..........................................77

Witness 7..........................................................................................................................89

Conclusion: Where Are We Now? Where Are We Going? ............................................90

Epilogue: Breaking News ...............................................................................................103

Bibliography ..................................................................................................................104
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Colby College Theater and Dance Department for giving me the opportunity to spend a year on this project. Thanks to Matt Gould and Griffin Matthews for allowing me to investigate your work. Thanks to Sara Gibbons for helping me innumerable times to find the exact word I was looking for and staying up late to work on our projects together. Thanks to Annie Kloppenberg for encouraging me to continue working and focus on self-care when I was overwhelmed. Finally, this thesis would not exist without the unending dedication of my advisor and mentor, Todd Coulter. Thank you for always challenging me and supporting me throughout this journey.
So when I tell people that I work in Uganda, they’re always like “Oh my god, are you building schools in Uganda?” And I’m like “no, Uganda has those buildings, those buildings exist, but school isn’t free. People can’t afford to get educated, so no, we’re not trying to resurrect buildings. We’re trying to resurrect people.

We’re trying to resurrect people. We’re trying to resurrect people.

And that’s a harder thing to prove than showing bricks.

We always in the West assume that aid can only be tied to dollars. Like you have to be giving people money they have to be building something or whatever they are doing with the money.

And you have to be able to, have to be able to, you know:

Count it and track it and count it and track it and count it and track it and count it.

Resurrect, resurrect, resurrect, resurrect, resurrect, resurrect people!
Resurrect, resurrect, resurrect, resurrect, resurrect, resurrect people!

---

Introduction: Why Is Making Change So Hard?

“In theatrical settings, people become receptive, and important lessons about life can be genially imparted from the stage.” -Sheldon Harnick

Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein’s Show Boat opened on Broadway in 1927, marking an important point in musical theater history. The show introduced the genre of the book musical. Most shows at the time were musical comedies, which did not use songs to push the plot forward, but simply to entertain the audience, using spoken text for plot development. Show Boat brought up important social issues which was rare for musical comedies of the time. The lavish score and comedic elements took some of the punch out of the serious topics, but the show dramatized issues such as inter-racial marriage, addiction to gambling and alcohol, and spousal desertion. The show follows the lives of Magnolia and Gaylord, who work on the floating theater Cotton Blossom on the Mississippi River. Their lives are set against the struggles of the Black workers on the boat. Captain Andy Hawks, Magnolia’s father, runs the boat. Magnolia and Gaylord fall in love, become successful actors on the ship, have a baby, and decide to move to Chicago. Gaylord falls into trouble with gambling and leaves his family. The secondary plot focuses on Julie, a mixed-race leading lady who must leave the boat when she realizes her marriage to White Steve is considered illegitimate under many Southern states’ laws. Julie begins to drink and enters a downward spiral. The show ends happily, however, when Gaylord and Magnolia reunite and their daughter, Kim, becomes a famous actress herself.

The show indicated a significant moment in the history of musical theater. The integration of songs in order to move the plot forward was improved to a level that had not been

---

1 Sheldon Harnick, foreword to Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theater (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 2003), 76.
2 Ibid., 74-75.
accomplished yet, but would be replicated numerous times from that point forward. The show is also important for its use of musical theater as vehicle for social change, asking its audiences to consider social issues like miscegenation and addiction. Although the show did attempt to tackle issues that were topical at that time, there were some areas in which the original production worked against its own message. Most of the African-American characters were played by African-American people, except for the main African-American character, Queenie. In the first production of *Show Boat*, Queenie was played by popular blackface performer Tess Gardella, disrupting the authentic racial casting in the show. Despite this casting, the musical worked to create social change by inviting the audience to think about their lives and compare them to the show. *Show Boat* is still used as an example for librettists and composers when creating a book musical as a quintessential model for the form.

Promoting social change has been a part of the book musical form from its beginning. Like *Show Boat*, many musicals have mirrored society and strived to illuminate social inequalities. Mirroring society does not create real social change; it simply asks the audience to reflect on social injustices instead of prompting further action. In addition to musical theater, I look at other forms of theater that attempt to create social change through more proactive action. These forms of theater are collectively called theater for social change. I use theater for social change to mean pieces of theater created by and/or for specific communities in order to improve society and promote social justice. Theater for social change must influence a group of oppressed people, use performance as action, focus on a specific community, and intend to increase social justice. Many forms of theater for social change include community members

---

4 Ibid., 77.
5 Ibid., 73.
who are usually untrained performers as cast members. Those who work in theater for social change actively strive for social justice. Theater for social change practitioners work with groups of underprivileged people in order to give them agency and work to eliminate inequalities in society. While book musicals work towards social justice through audience reflection, theater for social change works in more tangible and strategic ways to create change for the audience as well as the performers. In this thesis, I explore possible connections between books musicals and theater for social change. I investigate this issue by studying *Witness Uganda*, a book musical that focuses on the ethical dilemmas of Americans volunteering in other countries. Using this musical as a model, I look at how musical theater can use theater for social change techniques to improve our society. By encouraging collaboration between these two theatrical genres, theater makers can create work that reaches a large number of people while also producing social change in audience members and performers to shift society to be more equal and fair.

While there are outliers in both instances, generally musical theater and theater for social change creators do not borrow tactics from each other, regardless of similar goals for increased social justice. Musical theater does not usually use theater for social change practices because using often untrained members of a community as cast members will weaken the commercial viability of the production. Conversely, theater for social change productions will not use the structure of musicals because of the amount of skill that is presumably needed to present a musical theater piece at the regional theater level or higher that the cast may not possess. These reasons have created a climate where the two genres rarely intermingle. *Witness Uganda* was successful in utilizing some aspects of theater for social change but such aspects could have been integrated further into the production. By looking at *Witness Uganda*, I investigate if theater for social change techniques could be used more often in musical theater in order to create social
change in the popular genre. In situating *Witness Uganda* historically, I look at productions that have tried to use elements of both genres, where they have succeeded and why they might not have been successful. I point out the general lack of collaborations between the genres and where they could be possible in the future. Ultimately, I argue that musical theater could create more social change if it applied techniques from theater for social change.

**Witness Uganda**

In 2005, musical theater actor Griffin Matthews visited Uganda in order to give back to the less fortunate by helping build schools. While on this service trip, Matthews experienced first-hand the difficulties and paradoxes of aid work in Africa. He met a group of orphans who could not afford an education. He decided to take matters into his own hands. While he was in Uganda, he taught the children himself in a nearby library. After coming back to the United States, Matthews began the Uganda Project, a not-for-profit organization, to support the children’s education financially. The money not only pays for tuition, but also school supplies and clothes. For a couple years, it was fairly easy for Matthews to keep the children in school and visit Uganda annually. When the economic crisis hit in 2008, however, funding was extremely hard to come by.\(^7\) The Uganda Project struggled during the recession and Matthews was searching for money to send to the students, some of whom would soon be heading to university, nearly doubling the budget for the organization in a year.\(^8\) During this time, Matthews was talking to his partner, composer Matt Gould, about the difficulties and frustrations of aid work. He went on a rant about how it is easy to help, but most people simply do not want to take on the responsibility. Unbeknownst to Matthews, Gould recorded the rant and put the words to

\(^7\) Matt Gould (co-creator of *Witness Uganda*), in conversation with the author, September 2014.  
music. This song was the beginning of *Witness Uganda*. Matthews, a musical theater actor, and Gould, a composer, used their strengths in these areas to create a couple of songs to perform at a fundraiser for the Uganda Project. They taught the songs to some of their actor friends and put together a benefit concert, *Witness Uganda*, which was then just a collection of songs. The benefit concert was created with the hope of bringing in more money for the students in Uganda.

Surprisingly to Gould, the music at the concert sparked a lot of interest. Many people came up to Matthews and Gould after the performance telling them that the songs described their experiences with aid work as well. After performing the songs at several events, the two began to develop the songs into a musical called *Witness Uganda*. Eventually, the American Repertory Theater (A.R.T.) in Cambridge, MA selected the musical to be produced in early 2014. The musical told Matthews’ story of meeting the students in Uganda and creating the Uganda Project. Matthews played himself in the production, with the rest of the characters played by other musical theater professionals. Gould created the score and worked as conductor for the production. The ticket sales and merchandise sold during performances supported the Uganda Project.

*Witness Uganda* employed some strategies commonly used in theater for social change, although it could not be considered theater for social change by my definition. In this thesis, I look at *Witness Uganda* in terms of its development and the production at the A.R.T. I locate moments in which the show uses aspects of theater for social change, as well as where the show could have gone farther to increase its impact. In what ways did *Witness Uganda* break into new

---

9 “Witness Uganda: Matt Gould at TEDxWallStreet,” YouTube video, 16:05, posted by TEDx Talks, April 12, 2012, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k19yr7v_B4o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k19yr7v_B4o)

10 Gould, discussion.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.
territory? By using aspects of theater for social change, does the musical change? How will further development of *Witness Uganda* continue to use these aspects, or will the commercialization of the musical impact its ability to reach people in order to promote social justice?

**Categories and Outliers**

In order to have a clear understanding of my thesis, there are a couple categorizations that are important to clarify early on. Theater for social change is a broad label for several forms of theater. Each is connected by its focus on creating theater that works as social action, promoting a society that is free from oppression and liberating groups of people that have traditionally been marginalized. The two forms of theater for social change I focus on are Theatre of the Oppressed and community-based theater. These forms are similar but distinct approaches to theater for social change. Theatre of the Oppressed is a “composite system” created by Augusto Boal.\(^\text{13}\) It is made up of dramatic techniques used to “activate passive spectators” and allow performers and audience members to engage in “personal and social change.”\(^\text{14}\) Community-based theater is a style of creating theater for social change through working with a specific community to generate a piece that is meaningful in that community.\(^\text{15}\) Community-based theater should not be confused with community theater, which describes amateur theater put together by locals for the entertainment of fellow community members. Commonly used practices in theater for social change include using community members as performers, creating dialogue between performers and spectators during and after performances, and involving community members as co-creators with community-based artists. These two types of theater for social change both focus on a


\(^\text{14}\) Ibid.

\(^\text{15}\) Cohen-Cruz, *Local Acts*, 2.
specific underprivileged or oppressed community and look to create change that increases the social justice for that community.

Many musicals advocate for social justice and equality but few have attempted to use ideas from theater for social change in the process. It seems strange to me that these musicals want to work towards social justice, but they do not borrow ideas from a genre of theater whose sole focus is social justice. There have been some musicals that have come close to using tactics from theater for social change, including *Of Thee I Sing* (1931), *The Cradle Will Rock* (1937), *Oh What a Lovely War* (1963), and of course *Witness Uganda* (2014). Tactics used include commenting on specific people in the real world or current events, such as in *Of Thee I Sing* and *The Cradle Will Rock*, integrating real life events through quoting primary documents, such as in *Oh What a Lovely War*, and having people to play themselves on stage, such as in *Witness Uganda*. Musicals actively engage with social justice objectives by employing these tactics.

The above musicals are examples of the way ideas from theater for social change techniques can be utilized for larger audiences. It is uncommon for theater for social change to utilize the book musical structure; theater for social change practitioners do not often create performances that could be considered musicals. This phenomenon may happen because most theater for social change pieces use members of the community as cast members, who are not likely to have the trained in singing or dancing skills, or because musicals are often seen as a “silly or trivial art form.”

Examples of theater for social change that use musical theater include Mark Lynd’s *Get a Job!* (1991) and *Special* (1992), and the works created through Storycatchers Theatre. *Get a Job!* and *Special* were two musicals used in a participatory action research project by Mark Lynd focused on the difficulties of living as a developmentally disabled adult. The

---

performers in these musicals were participants in the project, developmentally disabled adults who were interested in creating a social action in order to improve the lives of those in their community. Storycatchers Theatre creates original musicals with “court-involved and incarcerated youth in detention facilities and juvenile prisons.” Their musicals are performed for family members and other guests from their community. The performers in these examples were not trained in music, theater or dance, but still used singing, acting and dancing to tell their story. Although these performances show that musical theater can be used in a theater for social change context, they are outliers in a field that often ignores the potential of using musical theater in community-based performances.

The critical study of musical theater as it pertains to social justice is very limited. Musicals in general are not seen as high brow art, but rather as only vehicles for pleasure, entertainment, and to let the audience forget their troubles. Musical theater does, however, have the power to create change in a large amount of people. Its large audiences, especially at the Off-Broadway and Broadway level, make musical theater a vessel for social change. The reason I am studying musical theater is because it has a history of being available to most Americans. Commercial musical theater reaches a large number of people. Musical theater that creates social change could produce change on a large scale. Theater for social change focuses on specific communities of oppressed groups whose voices are often silenced. Giving voice to these

18 Storycatchers Theatre, “Court Involved Youth,” [Storycatchers Theatre](http://www.storycatcherstheatre.org/what-we-do/court-involved-youth/).
19 Ibid.
communities is a useful tool to combat the inequalities in our society. Using the power of musical theater to give voice to the silenced on a larger scale is an important way to achieve social justice. *Witness Uganda* is a case study to look critically at a contemporary musical that attempts to make social change. This study highlights the ways in which musical theater can succeed at creating change today and where it can use aspects of theater for social change to enhance its ability to make change on a large scale to successfully make social justice a reality.

**Research Structure**

I use *Witness Uganda* as a case study to investigate the collaboration between musical theater and theater for social change, critically analyzing the show in order to learn more about the ability of musical theater to make social change today. Between each chapter, I include a musing on my experience while doing my research for the past year. In moments of frustration, I use a different style of writing that is laid out with more spaces and decisive statements. I decided to incorporate these writings for readers to understand my thought process while I realized that *Witness Uganda* is not musical theater for social change, as I hoped it would be. I call these musings Witnesses, playing off of the definition of witness as “evidence or proof” and the clear call out to *Witness Uganda.* These sections are used to illustrate my process in coming to a conclusion about the show.

In Chapter One, I discuss theater for social change. I give an overview on community-based theater and Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed system. These two forms of theater for social change are used worldwide. Both are generally acknowledged as effective methods in theater for social change. I explain the theories of Paulo Freire and Pierre Bourdieu that connect to the goals of theater for social change in connection to musical theater. The Freirean and

---

Bourdieusian theoretical lenses that I use throughout the study influence the way I analyze *Witness Uganda*. I spend some time unpacking the influence of Bertolt Brecht, Augusto Boal, and documentary plays on theater for social change. By critically reviewing important people and productions that have a connection to *Witness Uganda*, I situate the show within the context of theater for social change.

Chapter Two focuses on musicals that are politically charged and encourage social justice. By looking at *Of Thee I Sing* (1931), *The Cradle Will Rock* (1937), *Hair* (1967), and *Rent* (1996), I examine the ways musical theater can utilize different strategies in order to create social change. The musicals that I look at are popular, commercial shows that made it to Off-Broadway or Broadway. I look at shows that were influenced by their immediate social climate. While these shows may not have created a large amount of social change, they are important to understand how musical theater has a history of working towards change. By looking at the musicals that have worked towards this goal, I investigate in what ways musical theater is able to create social change.

Chapter Three begins the analysis of my case study, *Witness Uganda*. The chapter follows the life of the show. I look at the way the show was written, based on an interview with Matt Gould. The process is compared to the processes of Tectonic Theater Project and Anna Deavere Smith, who were inspirations to Gould while writing the show. I explain why the project began and its transition from a documentary musical to a book musical. I describe the plot of the musical. *Witness Uganda* was more connected to theater for social change in its earlier iterations. I focus on the changes over time in order to see when the show best promoted social justice, how, and for whom.
Chapter Four looks at the social justice topics examined throughout *Witness Uganda*. I give an overview of issues surrounding aid work in other countries, including the problematic tendency towards voluntourism. I explain how cultural capital operates in performances of *Witness Uganda* and why it is critical to understand privilege in the context of the production at the A.R.T. I analyze lyrics and lines from the production to illustrate the way they bring up social issues to the audience members that might not have prior knowledge of the complexities surrounding aid work. By having an awareness of the way the show tackles these social issues, it is easier to understand the type of social change that might have been created through the performances.

Chapter Five analyzes the level of success achieved by *Witness Uganda* in creating social change through an analysis of reviews of the production along with my own evaluation of the performance. I compare the ways different reviewers classify the performance and its effectiveness. I also look at how the addition of director Diane Paulus influenced the process. The final performance did work to create social change, but it is unclear whether the change has to do with Americans and their relationship with Ugandans or Americans and their relationship with the idea of aid work worldwide. I specifically look at where the production at the A.R.T. worked to create social change, where it succeeded and where it could have improved.

Chapter Six looks at relevant productions of different plays and musicals that offer different strategies for creating theater for social change. I describe two different performances that use Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed system, *The Crystal Quilt* (1987) and *Many Happy Retirements* (1990). I offer three examples of musical theater that fit within my criteria for theater for social change, *Steel/City* (1987), *Get a Job!* (1991) and *Special* (1992). I use these pieces as instances when musical theater and theater for social change have joined. I explore how
each production used a completely different process to focus on increasing social justice for a
certain community. These exemplary productions are important in understanding how *Witness Uganda* and other contemporary performances could develop in order to have a greater impact on society. In comparing these productions to *Witness Uganda*, I argue that the show could have taken many forms that might have increased its ability to create social change. I also look at where *Witness Uganda* used variations of the strategies and observe how they worked in a commercial musical theater setting.

In the conclusion, I compile how musical theater and theater for social change can and should exist within one performance. I review how *Witness Uganda* has created social change and the instances that the social change aims were not realized. I use *Witness Uganda* as a model for contemporary musicals looking to create social change in performance. I call upon the earlier discussions of both genres and look at their co-existence in performance as a key approach to bring theater for social change to the main stage and to allow musical theater to truly make an impact in the name of social justice. I outline tactics that have worked in the past, what did and did not work in *Witness Uganda*, and possible steps for the future. In the hopes of promoting social justice, performances should look for the connections between theater for social change and musical theater. Both genres lend themselves well to creating social change, but in different ways. Musical theater reaches much larger audiences generally, while theater for social change generally creates a larger amount of change in its audience members and performers. By using aspects of both, I argue that there is the potential to create lasting change with a large amount of people. Ultimately, commercialization is the largest roadblock when creating a piece of musical theater that works towards increasing social justice using theater for social change tactics. Although *Witness Uganda* is not an example of true combination of the two genres, it is an
important model for other productions looking to tackle difficult questions and create change through musical theater. By studying this production, I know that collaborations between the two genres are possible in order to create lasting social change in the world.
IS *WITNESS UGANDA* MUSICAL THEATER FOR SOCIAL CHANGE?

It is given that *Witness Uganda* is a musical, so now I need to prove that it is theater for social change.

If *Witness Uganda* meets the criteria for theater for social change, then *Witness Uganda* is musical theater for social change.

Criteria for Theater for Social Change:

1. Influences group of oppressed people
2. Performance as action
3. Focus on specific community
4. Intends to increase social justice
Chapter 1: Theater for Social Change

“Now the oppressed people are liberated themselves and, once more, are making the theater their own. The walls must be torn down.” —Augusto Boal

In Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed*, he explains how Aristotelian theater was coercive, first by separating the actors and the audience then by separating the lead characters from the chorus. He describes how theater can be used to liberate people, instead of reinforcing oppressive societal systems as in traditional Aristotelian theater. In this chapter, I focus on how theater has been used to realize the goals of social justice. Social justice means providing access to the freedom to pursue any life path without constraints from societal patterns and social inequities. Theater for social change must make a change in both the participants and audience members that works to alleviate the oppressive systems in our society and challenge power structures. I begin with an overview of theater for social change, focusing this study on community-based theater and Theatre of the Oppressed. I give a brief outline of the theoretical lenses of Paulo Freire and Pierre Bourdieu that I use throughout my thesis. I focus on important forms of theater for social change that I will be referencing later on, including the work of Bertolt Brecht, Augusto Boal, and documentary plays such as *In White America* (1963) and *Oh What a Lovely War* (1967). Theater for social change uses varying theatrical techniques in order to change societal inequities faced by marginalized groups. This chapter only gives a small taste of theater for social change, a genre that is wide-ranging and encompasses many types of theater.

---


24 When talking about the book, I will use italics (*Theatre of the Oppressed*). When talking about the method, I will use Theatre of the Oppressed.

25 Ibid.
I focus specifically on those that could have a place in musical theater, because my thesis is looking at the possible collaborations of the two genres.

**Categorizations of Theater for Social Change**

Before discussing different types of theater for social change, it is important to define several terms. I define theater for social change as any social action that uses theatrical techniques in order to increase social justice. I have created four criteria points for theater for social change based on my readings of Jan Cohen-Cruz and Augusto Boal. Theater for social change requires shows to influence a group of oppressed people, use performance as action, focus on a specific community, and intend to increase social justice. Community-based theater is the term used to describe the work of individuals or groups that enter a community in order to create a piece of theater in the community. Generally, community-based theater uses the motto “of, by, and for the people,” meaning that the piece being created must be inspired with the specific or particular community in mind.\(^\text{26}\) Community-based theater is a specific sect of community-based arts, a type of activism which works towards cultivating communities through engaging in the arts.\(^\text{27}\) It is important to point out the very clear distinction between community-based theater and community theater. Community theater, in contrast to theater that works towards social justice by engaging with the community to create a new work, describes amateur theater done in local settings, normally through a company devoted to making theater available for all in the town that want to join in. Theatre of the Oppressed is a method of theater for social change that was created and codified by Augusto Boal in Brazil. Boal breaks down the method in


his book, *Theatre of the Oppressed*. His system has been reproduced in many other contexts in order to give agency to groups of people that are marginalized.

In this thesis, I focus on community-based theater practices and Theatre of the Oppressed. I am interested in studying these forms in terms of their possible connections to musical theater. These types of theater for social change exist in productions that are focused on very specific communities. While social change on a larger scale is often the goal of social justice workers, concentrating on individual communities lets each project stay true to the “of, by, and for the people” philosophy. Both forms focus on liberating oppressed groups through working with a specific community. Experimenting with how specific communities can be put in front of a larger audience is one way I believe musical theater can be used in conjunction with theater for social change.

**Theoretical Framework**

In this study, I will be making connections to several different theories. It is important to understand how I will be talking about each theorist before introducing the following chapters. My theoretical framework focuses mostly on power, privilege, cultural capital and the effects of increasing consciousness of the structures that reproduce a hierarchical society. I look at the theories of Paulo Freire and Pierre Bourdieu to position my paper in conversation with theories that seek to understand the social systems of power. These theories serve as a way to look at the power dynamics and social structures in play during the productions I analyze. Both theorists have specific methods to discuss how power and oppression manifest themselves in society. The ideas are used in social justice work through many contexts, because of their relevance to the task of understanding and breaking down power structures in society.
Oppressed people are those who have been systematically disadvantaged. They lack power and agency, both in the political sphere and social sphere, because of a certain identity or identities they possess. Oppressors are those who are in power. Privilege is the ability to have a choice about which injustices and differences in agency and power you notice and react to based on a person’s status as part of the oppressing group. For example, men usually have the privilege not to worry about safety when walking home on a dark street, something women do not have the option to forget. To discuss oppression and privilege acceptably, it is crucial to understand intersectionality. Intersectionality describes how different parts of identity (such as gender, race, sexuality, ability, class, etc.) converge to create a unique understanding of power and privilege. While someone may be oppressed through one part of their identity, they may be privileged in another, giving them a different lens than someone who may have different intersections of identity. For example, as a White straight educated cis woman, I am privileged by being White, straight, educated, and cis-gender, but am oppressed as a woman. My experience of privilege and oppression works in a different way than, say, Griffin Matthews, the Black homosexual cis male actor, who is privileged in his identity as a cis man but oppressed in his identity as a Black gay person. To look at power and privilege with a critical eye, intersectionality must be brought into the conversation continually.

Paulo Freire focused on bringing literacy to the peasants of Brazil. He created his theory based around the idea that the oppressed must be educated through dialogue rather than simply

---

28 Barry Deutsch, “The Male Privilege Checklist,” Alas, a blog, 2001, [http://amptoons.com/blog/the-male-privilege-checklist/](http://amptoons.com/blog/the-male-privilege-checklist/). This checklist was set up as a response to Peggy McIntosh’s “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” and used in Colby College’s Boys to Men class in the Education department taught by Professor Mark Tappan.
being handed information, if they are ever to escape from their oppression. The Freirean theories that I focus on are his concepts of dialogue, critical thinking and conscientization. Freire believes dialogue is an “essential necessity” when doing social justice work. Dialogue means having equal participation in a conversation from both parties, usually the oppressor and the oppressed, in order to work on breaking down power structures. Each group can gain from the other through any type of conversation, but dialogue only works if there is critical thinking. Freire defines critical thinking as,

…thinking which discerns an indivisible solidarity between the world and the people and admits of no dichotomy between them – thinking which perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity – thinking which does not separate itself from action but constantly immerses itself in temporality without fear of the risks involved.

In this definition, Freire points to how a dichotomy between the oppressed and oppressors is detrimental to having meaningful dialogue. By thinking critically, groups break down the dichotomy to transform into solidarity between all people in the conversation who are committed to fighting for freedom. Freire points out the paradox that only dialogue, which itself requires critical thinking, can generate critical thinking. Here is the difficulty in navigating the role of a facilitator in a social justice project: as a privileged person, one is the oppressor, attempting to facilitate increased critical thinking while producing dialogue between oppressed people rather than teaching critical thinking in a way that only continues the oppression because it was not organically understood by the oppressed people. The third Freirean term I discuss here is conscientization, or critical consciousness, which focuses on the ability to understand the social

---

30 Ibid., 88.
31 Ibid., 93.
structures of the world and how they affect those who are oppressed. Dialogue and critical thinking are used to encourage conscientization, so that the oppressed can “deepen their critical awareness of reality and…take possession of that reality.”\textsuperscript{32} These ideas are important to keep in mind when understanding how privilege manifests itself in theater for social change.

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu studied how privilege and power are passed down through generations. The Bourdieusian concept of cultural capital is extremely important when understanding power structures and how they are reproduced. Bourdieu defines cultural capital as non-monetary resources or knowledge that can help a person achieve or maintain high social status.\textsuperscript{33} There are three types of cultural capital: objectified, embodied, and institutionalized. Objectified capital includes objects that can be bought and sold that have cultural value as well as monetary, such as a piece of art that can be used to boost status. Embodied capital pertains to customs and actions of the elite that are taught, such as how to eat with different cutlery at a fancy dinner or how to play golf. These skills have an embodied status associated with them. They require personal capital, or the privilege associated with having relationships with people of high status, to acquire the cultural capital. Institutionalized capital is gained through earning credentials and qualifications from elite institutions, such as a doctorate degree or a high-ranking position in an important company.\textsuperscript{34} All three types of cultural capital are in play in the context of theater. Owning tickets or memorabilia from a Broadway show constitutes objectified cultural capital. The knowledge of how to behave in a theatrical context and how to talk about theater intelligently acts as embodied cultural capital. Those with degrees in theater, a very privileged

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 106.
field of study, show institutionalized cultural capital. Through community-based theater, cultural capital has the potential to be passed down to those who might not gain it otherwise. However, while looking at how privilege and power are in play through community-based theater, it is important to note that the facilitator almost always will possess much more cultural capital than the participants. Through these theories, facilitators can keep in mind how power and privilege effect their projects.

**Epic, Forum, and Documentary Theater**

Theater for social change uses the concepts of oppression, power and privilege to give agency to those who do not have it. Theater for social justice practitioners are looking to increase social justice, although they use different tactics to approach their similar goals. Bertolt Brecht, Augusto Boal, and documentary playwrights such as Joan Littlewood and Martin Duberman have greatly influenced theater for social change. Their work embodies different aspects of theater for social change that must be understood if we are to recognize how it can inform musical theater. This section looks at how epic, forum and documentary theater connect to musical theater. There are aspects of all three forms that I will discuss in relationship to *Witness Uganda*. By understanding how theater has been used to make social change in different contexts, we can explore the many options provided by theater for social change and the merits of different methods. In this section, I explore three different ways in which theater for social change has operated, looking at the success of each and what they can bring to my study.

Bertolt Brecht was a groundbreaking theater maker for many reasons. For the purposes of this thesis, I focus on his attempts to challenge audience comfort in order to produce change and his use of music in that process. Brecht was interested in “the attitudes which people adopt
towards one another, wherever they are socio-historically significant.”

His brand of theater, epic theater, was socially conscious and actively worked towards creating a change in the audience. Brechtian theater is often discussed in relationship to his use of *Verfremdungseffekt*, often translated as alienation effect. One of the uses of *Verfremdungseffekt* is to require the audience to think critically about the situation seen in performance, as opposed to being emotionally attached to the characters, in order to be moved towards political action. He created this action by using a style of acting that was more presentational rather than realistic. This critical distance, according to Brecht, is “necessary to all understanding.”

He understood Aristotelian catharsis to be “the spiritual cleansing of the spectator,” which allows the spectator to be carried away by the emotions on the performance. Brecht hoped that, by denying an audience an emotional release like most theatrical experiences, the audience would have an analytic view of the performance and energy to act on that perspective in order to create social change. Most musical theater has a presentational style of acting that is not realistic, like Brecht’s work. However, book musicals attempt to bring the audience on an emotional journey rather than using a distancing effect on the audience members.

Brecht utilized music as part of *Verfremdungseffekt*. To distance the audience, Brecht created a strict separation of the musical elements of the performance. Actors changed place on stage, the lighting changed, and the mood could be altered. Music was used in order to make audiences reconsider something they thought they knew. By making a clear distinction between songs and dialogue, the audience must remember that they are watching a performance, not real

---

36 Ibid., 95.
37 Ibid., 71.
38 Ibid., 87.
39 Ibid., 85.
life. Brecht’s treatment of music and his process of *Verfremdungseffekt* are important factors to consider when relating theater for social change and musical theater. Matt Gould, when discussing the choice to change *Witness Uganda* from a documentary musical to a book musical, said that he made the change in order to “take people on a journey they could have an experience with.” The book musical structure attempts to seamlessly switch between spoken dialogue and music. The choice to turn *Witness Uganda* into a book musical opposes Brecht’s belief that social change will come from denying the audience an emotional journey.

Augusto Boal, as stated previously, was the creator of the Theatre of the Oppressed method. As a contemporary of Paulo Freire, Boal used Freirean ideas in his theater practices in order to give agency to the underprivileged in Brazil. Boal created several different theatrical techniques that work towards conscientization. A commonly used method in the Theatre of the Oppressed system is forum theater. In forum theater, actors play out a short scene, usually having to do with power dynamics or issues that are deeply important to the community members who make up the audience. The audience members are invited to pause the scene and take the place of one of the actors, making a difference choice. Audience members continue this trend for most of the performance. The Joker, Boal’s term for the facilitator, acts as a neutral guide who encourages more exploration. Boal thinks of audience members as spect-actors, allowing the performer-audience dichotomy to disappear. He sees the performer-audience dichotomy to be parallel to the oppressors-oppressed dichotomy that Freire investigates. By allowing underprivileged audiences to break down the performer-audience dichotomy, Boal allows the oppressed to “rehearse the revolution” through gaining agency in the safe space created by the

---

40 Matt Gould (co-creator of *Witness Uganda*), in conversation with the author, September 17, 2014.
41 Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, 139.
Increasing agency is an important step to breaking down power structures in our society and therefore an important facet of theater for social change that could be applied to musical theater.

Documentary plays are defined as pieces of theater that use pre-existing texts to create the script. The plays use real-life source materials to make social commentary. An important early documentary play is *In White America* (1963), which uses primary documents to examine how race has affected American culture and the struggles of African Americans in a predominantly White America. Playwright Martin Duberman expressed an interest in using theater as a way to build pity and sympathy, encouraging “past reality [to] enter into present consciousness [that was] validated by the documentary format.” Joan Littlewood used this format along with aspects of musical theater in *Oh What a Lovely War* (1967). The show uses songs and documents from World War I to point out the horrors of war. Littlewood uses music in a distancing way, similar to Brecht, requiring that productions project photographs taken during the war “to counterpoint the words of the songs” which are cheerful and patriotic. By creating a counterpoint to the songs, Littlewood uses the documentary style to evoke a response to real events that encourages audiences to act.


---

42 Ibid., 155.
Heights riots in 1991 between the Hassidic and African-American communities.\textsuperscript{45} Tectonic Theater Project’s \textit{The Laramie Project} (2000) uses over 200 interviews from people in the town of Laramie, Wyoming in response to the murder of Matthew Shepard in October 1998.\textsuperscript{46} Both pieces used interviews as dramatic text to comment on social issues such as racial tensions and homophobia. These two documentary plays were inspirations for Matt Gould while he worked on the early stages of \textit{Witness Uganda}.\textsuperscript{47} These examples of documentary plays show that the form has the ability to create consciousness and social change in their audiences. Using a compilation of texts that come from the real world, rather than written by the playwright, allows the audience to gain an understanding of an existing social problem. Documentary plays are not objective; they often take a clear point of view in how the audience should react, but by using text from reality, they allow the audience to gain perspective on an actual issue and hopefully take true steps towards social change after experiencing the performance.

This chapter has been a review of the theories and theatrical methods that will be discussed throughout my thesis. As I continue to discuss musical theater, theater for social change, and how the two can develop an increased amount of collaborations, I will be going back to these concepts as central components of making social change through theater. As I discuss \textit{Witness Uganda} as a primary case study, I will look at other productions that use these theories and tactics. Some projects will fall under a specific category I have mentioned, while others will use individual elements of different categories. Some may fall under the umbrella of theater for social change but do not fit into the general categories I have detailed in this chapter. Aiming for

\textsuperscript{46} Tectonic Theater Project, “The Laramie Project,” \textit{Tectonic Theater Project}, \texttt{http://www.tectonictheaterproject.org/The_Laramie_Project.html}.
\textsuperscript{47} Matt Gould (co-creator of \textit{Witness Uganda}) in conversation with the author, September 17, 2014.
social justice means working to reduce the inequalities in society and limiting the way power prevents all people from having the ability to achieve success. It is important to be aware that power and privilege are at play in theater that works to create social change. Only with an understanding of these power structures can theater makers combat systematic marginalization through creating art.
Witness 2

IF shows working towards social justice have to do with groups of oppressed people, use performance as action, focus on a specific community, and intend to increase social justice

AND

IF Witness Uganda is a musical working towards social justice,

THEN Witness Uganda must have to do with groups of oppressed people, use performance as action, focus on a specific community, and intend to increase social justice.

If I can prove that Witness Uganda fulfills all of these requirements, then I will have proved that Witness Uganda can be considered musical theater for social change.
Chapter 2: Musicals in Society

“What’s important is that art in any form communicates with its audience. What’s important is that people come out thinking – about themselves, their lives, the world around them”

-Scott Miller

While encouraging changes in thought is the first step, I suggest art is responsible for more than just thinking, but also encouraging action. Historically, musical theater engages the audience in new thoughts, but I believe that musical theater has the possibility to incite action as well. I begin this chapter with an intensive look at American Musical Theater. First, I define the book musical and its relevance to my thesis. Through an examination of Of Thee I Sing (1931), The Cradle Will Rock (1937), Hair (1967), and Rent (1996), I argue that there is an inherent political nature to many pieces of musical theater. Witness Uganda follows the trend of Show Boat and the musicals I discuss in this chapter; it brings up important issues of the specific social climate. I argue musical theater has often created work in response to the social atmosphere around it, commenting on society and attempting to draw focus to areas that should be changed but rarely inciting further action from its audiences. By learning from these productions, I believe musical theater creators can begin to employ more strategies from theater for social change in order to work harder and more directly for social justice.

Book Musicals: A Brief Overview

Our discussion of musical theater in America began in the Introduction, with Show Boat. This show marked the beginning of book musicals, developing a structure that has stayed almost completely intact today. The importance of the book musical is in the full integration of song and dance to push the plot forward along with traditional scripted dialogue. Although Show Boat

48 Scott Miller, Rebels with Applause: Broadway’s Groundbreaking Musicals (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001), ix.
began the transition towards true book musicals, *Oklahoma!* finished it, with the integration of
dance to move the plot forward.\(^{49}\) Musical theater scholar John Kenrick created a list of what
makes up a book musical: music and lyrics, a book/libretto, choreography, staging, and physical
production.\(^{50}\) These elements make up the foundation of all book musicals from *Show Boat* to
most productions on Broadway today. The importance of the book/libretto being combined is
that the lyrics are equally as significant as the spoken dialogue. Book musicals have a narrative
in which all of these elements combine, focusing on one set of characters or a particular theme.
Predecessors of the book musical, such as operettas or musical comedies, lacked the full
integration that *Show Boat* and *Oklahoma!* offered.\(^{51}\) *Oklahoma!* marked a change not only for
its use of dance as a plot device but also for the way songs were used non-realistically. The songs
appeared “naturally from the preceding dialogue,” as opposed to most songs in *Show Boat* that
were sung in the context of performances on the boat.\(^ {52}\) This shift away from realistic settings for
song and dance and allowing musical numbers to flow in and out of dialogue created a change in
acting style, from realistic portrayals to broader acting choices. The focus on a narrative plot
separates book musicals from revues or concept musicals. While there are other types of musical
theater that have emerged, my focus on book musicals allows for a deep analysis of plot and how
music and choreography can enhance a plot-driven piece of theater.

While musical theater is often deemed middle-brow and therefore not worthy of study,
Stacy Wolf believes that its status as middle-brow entertainment is exactly why it must be

\(^{49}\) John Bush Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theater*
(Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 2003), 142.  
\(^{51}\) Scott Miller, *Strike Up the Band: A New History of Musical Theatre* (Portsmouth, NH:
Heinemann, 2007), 6.  
\(^{52}\) Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves*, 142.
studied.\textsuperscript{53} Other forms of art, such as opera or visual arts, have been seen as highly elite and only available to the privileged for a long time. Musical theater has only recently reached that elite status, with prices for Broadway and Off-Broadway shows limiting the ability for all people to see productions. For much of its history, musical theater has been available to a large number of Americans, making it an incredible tool to understand the attitudes of Americans at the time.\textsuperscript{54} Musical theater scholar John Bush Jones claims that before the turn of the century, musical theater had modest prices that were affordable for the middle-class and lower priced seats that allowed “even people of modest means” to attend.\textsuperscript{55} Audiences were “not necessarily extremely affluent until late in the century and after,” with a new precedent set by \textit{The Producers} (2001) with $100 orchestra seats.\textsuperscript{56} Musical theater has often worked as a “theatrical vehicle that intended to transform, not just report, the tenor of the times.”\textsuperscript{57} A study of musical theater is a study of Americans and what they wanted to see, hear, and know.

While musical theater may be seen as light entertainment, it can give scholars a sense of how Americans reacted to their entertainment that also attempted to dramatize, mirror, and challenge their cultural attitudes.\textsuperscript{58} Studying musicals gives voice to the average American through art. Wolf argues that musical theater scholarship is important because “as a popular, commercial form it [musical theater] necessarily reflects and speaks to and from the culture” in which a show was created.\textsuperscript{59} Indeed, Diane Paulus, director of \textit{Witness Uganda} and artistic director of the American Repertory Theater, has been championing a populist theater where

\begin{flushleft}

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{55} Jones, \textit{Our Musicals, Ourselves}, 3.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 1.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{59} Wolf, “In Defense of Pleasure.”
\end{flushleft}
productions are being made with the masses in mind, not just “theater snobs,” especially in musicals she has directed such the revivals of *Hair* (2009) and *Pippin* (2013). For Paulus, the accessibility of theater is important in getting people to see shows. When many Americans frequent musical theater productions, musical theater scholars can investigate which works speak to the current social climate. By looking at productions that were successful, researchers learn something about the interests of the audience members. If a show had a long continuous run, we can understand that it was kept running by an interest of the general public in the topics it brought up as well as the story it told. Far from being trivial, musical theater is an important tool to understand society. Scholars sometimes perceive middlebrow work like musical theater as less important or academic, and yet work that is seen by the masses often tells us the most about the present social climate. Musical theater, with its occasionally silly plot points or inexplicable moments of breaking into song and dance, has almost always been created for the masses and therefore can be used as a tool for understanding society.

**Tendency Toward Change**

The musicals that are the main focus of this study are musicals that respond to their own social climate. The musicals that I have decided to study take on issues such as racism, sexism, and homophobia. In this section, I give a sampling of musicals that have responded to societal injustices in very specific ways. *Of Thee I Sing* satirized the government, allowing the audience to laugh and share in a mutual frustration rather than the show acting as a call-to-arms. *The Cradle Will Rock* depicted real-life situations by mirroring society critically and looking at the importance of unions. The first production also showcases that musicals can cause turmoil and fear of creating social change in the government. *Hair* attempted to create empathy in its

---

audiences for the hippie counterculture, teaching its middle-class audiences about the protesters and flower children during the Vietnam War. *Rent* worked to explore the lives of people who were ostracized from the mainstream public, but ended up creating change by introducing Otherness through an innocuous narrator. I have chosen these four because of their highly politicized nature and the different methods that each piece used to create a change in its audience. None of the shows succeed in creating social change in the way theater for social change can, but it is important to understand that musical theater has created change in other instances before discussing how the form could be improved.

**Of Thee I Sing**

*Of Thee I Sing* is a political satire that premiered in 1931, with music by George Gershwin, lyrics by Ira Gershwin and a book by George S. Kaufman and Morrie Ryskind. The musical was the first to win a Pulitzer Prize for Drama, causing it to be one of the first musicals to be published as a hardcover that could be read like a book. The story is a farcical mockery of the U.S. government, following the presidential campaign and presidency of John Wintergreen, who is running on the platform of love. The book was consciously parodying the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta model that used lighthearted situations and popular musical styles to tell a story. Wintergreen tells the American public that he will marry the most beautiful woman in the U.S. based on a beauty pageant. However, he goes back on his promise upon meeting a plainer woman, Mary, who he loves because of her empathy, kindheartedness, and most importantly, her corn muffins. Wintergreen and Mary get married, but this choice causes the winner of the pageant, Diana, to sue him, attempt to get him impeached, and almost start a war with France. Thanks to First Lady Mary for giving birth to twins and the constitution awarding

---

the Vice President the honor of marrying Diana, the show has a happy ending.\textsuperscript{62} While the story is rather silly, the political commentary is evident throughout the show.

Although the plot of the show was not based on anyone in particular, it generally satirized the government throughout. There are many witty remarks made at the government’s expense throughout the production. The President and Vice President laugh about how making speeches will cause the stock market go down, but when the Vice President asks how to make the stock market go up, the President replies “oh! Wouldn’t I like to know!” This joke, at a time when real President Hoover was struggling after the devastating stock market crash in 1929, was welcomed by audience members who were feeling the effect of the crash in all aspects of their lives.\textsuperscript{63} The “foibles of the American political system” are mocked when the plot is resolved by Wintergreen remembering “when the President of the United States is unable to fulfill his duties [in this case, marrying Diana], his obligations are assumed by the Vice President,” to which the Vice President cries “I get her!”\textsuperscript{64} At one point, the President jokes about the fact that the Bank of the United States had closed, chuckling, “I never will forget the time I reopened the Bank of the United States by mistake.” The real Bank of the United States failed shortly before Christmas 1930. It was the worst bank failure in American history.\textsuperscript{65} Pointed topical asides made fun of “farm surpluses, Hoover’s proposal for an international moratorium on war debts, speakeasies, unemployment, and phonograph records losing sales because of radio’s popularity.”\textsuperscript{66} These remarks poked fun at the government in which so many Americans had lost faith.

\textsuperscript{62} Stanley Green, \textit{Broadway Musicals: Show By Show} (New York: Applause, 2008), 78.
\textsuperscript{63} Jones, \textit{Our Musicals, Ourselves}, 97.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 94.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 95.
The satirical nature of the show allowed for Americans to laugh at the government, which is something they desperately needed to do. Although the story and characters were “made for good fun,” individual lines of dialogue carried the tongue-in-cheek commentary about the government’s inadequacy. At the time of the show’s opening, the Great Depression was continuing to hurt millions of Americans. Banks were closing, jobs were being lost, and any trust that the government could fix the mess was gone. Of Thee I Sing was not trying to encourage an attitude change of members of our government, but allow audiences a new way to experience the government’s incompetence that was less disheartening. It worked to show “Kaufman and Ryskind’s sympathy with millions of Americans who, like Wintergreen, looked forward to better days, but who had not immediate solutions for the present hard times.” The comical structure mixed with the pointed content is the reason Of Thee I Sing created a change in its audiences. The writers were able to show their sympathy for the American people through making fun of the government that was causing so much grief. Scott Miller claims the show “RAILED angrily and despairingly (though oh so cleverly) at the triviality, insincerity and uselessness of American politics and politicians.” By providing an outlet for these feelings of anguish, the writers created a healthy change in their audiences by allowing them to ridicule their leaders, taking out some of the pain that was continually present during the Great Depression. Although the social change in this instance was not outward action against the government that was causing the grief, Of Thee I Sing provided an outlet for social anxieties. Allowing audiences to laugh at the government’s expense provided comfort in the fact that others were going through similar

67 Ibid., 94.
68 Ibid., 96.
69 Miller, Strike Up the Band, 34.
frustrations and any opportunities to sympathize together meant collective healing. Turning anger and frustration into laughter is an important tool used by artists in times of crisis.

*The Cradle Will Rock*

*The Cradle Will Rock* was a musical written by Marc Blitzstein, first performed in 1937. The show was originally created as part of the Federal Theatre Project, a section of the Works Projects Administration that attempted to get performing artists back to work during the Great Depression. The musical follows the story of Moll, a prostitute who was sent to night court in the corrupt town of Steeltown, USA. The story is set up as a series of flashbacks told to Moll by Harry Druggist, a drug store owner also sent to jail, recounting how the town was taken over by the evil Mr. Mister, who owns the steel factory and the entire town. Anyone who has any connection with the union is immediately jailed. After intermission, Moll meets Larry Foreman, the union organizer, after he is jailed for his actions. Larry is offered a large bribe by Mr. Mister himself, in order to stop his union activities. The show ends after Larry Foreman refuses a bribe in order to fight the corruption in the town and the workers rise up against Mr. Mister.71

The production was shut down right before opening night. Although the given reason was budget cuts, many involved in the production believed that the government was censoring the production based on its pro-union stance.72 After being locked out of the theater and kept away from all sets, props, and costumes, Blitzstein found another venue to perform on schedule. Although the Actors’ Equity Association, the actors union, did not allow the actors in the show to perform on stage, Blitzstein planned to play the songs on his piano. Filling the house of their new theater during the first preview, the actors sang their parts from their seats, thereby not

---

70 Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves*, 96.
71 Green, *Broadway Musicals* 101.
72 Miller, *Rebels with Applause*, 4.
breaking the Equity rules. Director Orson Welles resigned over the attempted closing and producer John Houseman was fired for “insubordination.” The radical nature of the content in *The Cradle Will Rock* fit with the Head of the Federal Theatre Project Hallie Flanagan’s general philosophy about theater. Flanagan believed that theater should be “closer to the real lives of ordinary Americans… [and should deal] with real-world issues and presented realistic portrayals of everyday Americans.” Flanagan was interested in allowing the Federal Theatre Project to make highly politicized experimental work such as *The Cradle Will Rock*. Flanagan defended the show’s controversial nature, saying about it, “the theatre, when it’s good, is always dangerous.”

*The Cradle Will Rock* is an important example of musical theater that is highly politicized and promotes a progressive idea. The show clearly wanted to portray to the audience the importance of unions. They satirized real political figures, such as J. P. Morgan, and were allegedly shut down because of the highly political views that they expressed in the musical. The actors also took a political stance by performing in a different way, sitting in their seats in the house in order to not break Equity rules. Some said that the actors in the audience made the show better, involving the audience in the production in a way that never had happened before. *The Cradle Will Rock* demonstrates that musicals can raise awareness through commentary on a social issue. The show carried a great deal of intensity, so much that the government shut it down in anticipation of the audience reactions to seeing the pro-union stance glorified. This

---

73 Ibid., 5.
74 Ibid., 9.
75 Ibid., 5.
76 Ibid.
77 It should be noted that *Urinetown*, which opened in September 2001, has a very similar plot to *The Cradle Will Rock*. Jones writes, “Bobby Strong and Cladwell [two main characters in *Urinetown*] are blood brothers to Cradle’s Larry Foreman and Mr. Mister.” (*Our Musicals, Ourselves* 357)
show must be remembered for its relationship to the government, its radical pro-union content, its shift in performing structure, and its ability to cause change by inspiring its audience.

Hair

*Hair: The American Tribal Love Rock Musical* was written with the book and lyrics by James Rado and Gerome Ragni and music by Galt MacDermot. The show was first produced at the New York Shakespeare Festival’s Public Theater in 1967. The show then had a brief run at the Cheetah, a New York disco, before having major revisions and opening on Broadway in 1968. The show depicts the hippie counterculture of the 60’s, following a tribe of young people in the East Village in New York City in the midst of the Vietnam War protests. *Hair* was created specifically for the “typical Broadway theatergoers” at the time, “America’s still-entrenched mainstream middle class.” It was made to inform the audience of the counterculture and the ideas of the New Left that it represented. Rado and Ragni hoped the show would “persuade those who watch [the show] of [the counterculture’s] intentions, to perhaps gain greater understanding, support, and tolerance, and thus perhaps expand their horizons of active participation toward a better, saner, love-full world.” It had a specific social change in mind when creating the piece, which effected the resulting fragmented plot.

The plot follows Claude who struggles with his decision to join the army after being drafted. He is persuaded not to go for a time by his best friends, high school dropout Berger and NYU protester Sheila. After a love triangle, an intense acid trip, and frustrating arguments with his parents, Claude makes the decision to uphold his draft and go to Vietnam. At the end of the

---

80 Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves*, 249.
81 Ibid.
show, it is suggested that he dies during the war. The musical spends much less time on its plot than most musicals. Its large score has many songs that simply focus on themes such as race in America, anti-war sentiments, environmental concerns, and innocence. Vignettes between supporting characters help forward the action into each song. It is debatable whether Hair is a book musical as opposed to a concept musical. Because the show was radical in many ways, I understand Rado and Ragni’s choice to reject the typical book musical form as another way to reject the normal institutions that the show addresses. Musical theater scholar John Bush Jones calls Hair “the first fragmented musical.” Although it does not fit with the book musicals that I have discussed, it is so important in its social justice stance that I feel it is necessary to address the show equally. According to Scott Miller, the show “rejected every convention of Broadway, of traditional theatre in general, and specifically of the American musical.” This rejection must have been what audiences were looking for because the show was a huge hit in New York City.

Here is a clear example of a musical that is attempting to create a change in the audience. The creators wanted attitudes about hippies and the youth counterculture to change and to spread awareness of what the counterculture represented. By doing a musical on Broadway, they were able to reach the audience that they intended to change. While the show surprisingly did not have to deal with censorship of the nudity or other “obscene” images throughout the Broadway run, it was censored and in some cases banned from performing in other cities around the country. This censorship points out the radical nature of the piece as compared to other musicals that were being performed, but its 1,844 performances in New York show that it was well-received and

---

82 Green, Broadway Musicals, 224.
83 Concept musicals are musicals that focus on the statement of the musical more than the narrative plot.
84 Jones, Our Musicals, Ourselves, 273.
85 Miller, Rebels with Applause, 67.
86 Ibid., 252.
attended in that city.\textsuperscript{87} Although Jones is correct in assessing that “Hair”’s content and vocabulary, encapsulating the look, sound, and feel of the late 1960’s, tied the musical more to its moment in history than perhaps any other,” it is also important to recall that Hair had a successful revival in 2009 under the direction of Diane Paulus. In spite of its historical context, it still felt relevant and important to perform many years later. Hair is important to my study for bringing up radical content, rejecting the commonly used book musical structure, and succeeding financially while appealing the intended audience.

\textit{Rent}

\textit{Rent} is a rock musical with book, music and lyrics by Jonathan Larson.\textsuperscript{88} The show had a reading at the New York Theatre Workshop in 1993, followed by subsequent readings in 1994 and 1995. In early 1996, the show opened Off-Broadway before moving to the Nederlander Theatre on Broadway in April 1996.\textsuperscript{89} The story is loosely based on the opera \textit{La Bohême}, following a group of artists in New York City’s Alphabet City in the late 1990’s. The main characters include Mark, a filmmaker, Roger, a musician, Collins, a philosophy professor, Mimi, a dancer, Maureen, a performance artist, Angel, a street percussionist, and Joanne, a lawyer. Collins and Angel and Maureen and Joanne are both gay couples. Roger and Mimi start a relationship during the action of the show. The plot revolves around their changing relationships and frustrations with life in near poverty while attempting to be true to their passions. Collins, Angel, Roger and Mimi are HIV positive, which effects their lives greatly. Angel passes away during the show, and Mimi nearly dies at the end before the group comes together to live out

\textsuperscript{87} Jones, \textit{Our Musicals, Ourselves}, 251.
\textsuperscript{88} Green, \textit{Broadway Musicals}, 305. There has been dispute around dramaturg Lynn Thompson in writing \textit{Rent}, however, as the case was settled after Thompson losing the first trial, I cite Larson as the composer/librettist of the show.
\textsuperscript{89} Miller, \textit{Rebels with Applause}, 185.
their days enjoying each other’s company.\textsuperscript{90} \textit{Rent} has been called the \textit{Hair} of the 90’s, because it broke traditional musical rules and has a “genuine rock and roll” score that had not been seen since \textit{Hair} in the late 60’s.\textsuperscript{91} The show emphasizes troubles in the youth culture of that era, when musicals were more commonly being created for middle-class, middle-aged people who could afford to see musicals on a regular basis.

\textit{Rent} is incredibly important to study when discussing musicals that make social change. The show was an instant hit, showing that the ideas were clearly something that Americans were desperate to hear about. Larson wrote of the musical, “\textit{Rent}…exalts Otherness, glorifying artists and counterculture as necessary to a healthy civilization.”\textsuperscript{92} The importance of \textit{Rent} is shown in the audience reception of the show as well as the commercial success of the production. The show became a phenomenon soon after it opened. The show and its cast were featured in the \textit{New York Times}, \textit{Newsweek}, \textit{Vanity Fair}, \textit{Rolling Stone}, and \textit{Harper’s Bazaar}, as well as appearing on television shows like \textit{The Late Show with David Letterman}, \textit{The Charlie Rose Show}, and \textit{The Tonight Show}, even singing at the 1996 Democratic National Convention.\textsuperscript{93} In an effort to allow younger audiences to afford tickets, the producers made the first two rows of every performance $20 tickets so that “the people the show was written for could afford to see it.”\textsuperscript{94} The producers, who musical theater scholar Scott Miller calls “as new to Broadway as the cast was,” made a radical choice to allow those with less financial capital to see the

\textsuperscript{90} Green, \textit{Broadway Musicals}, 305.
\textsuperscript{91} Miller, \textit{Rebels with Applause}, 190. It is important to note that not all scholars agree that \textit{Rent} included ‘genuine rock and roll’ sound, but as compared to most musicals that were as popular at the time, I believe that it had one of the most authentic rock and roll sounds.
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 185.
\textsuperscript{93} Miller, \textit{Strike Up the Band}, 191.
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid.
performances, as long as they had enough time to wait in line for many hours.\textsuperscript{95} Although ticket prices in normal seats were just as steep as other Broadway shows, \textit{Rent} worked to allow “lively...passionate...appreciative” audience members in the front row.\textsuperscript{96} This choice showcases the producers’ desire to create social change on Broadway in a tangible way and allow for those with less financial capital to still have the ability to gain cultural capital through seeing a Broadway production.

Like \textit{Hair}, \textit{Rent} introduced normally taboo topics and characters (“overtly sexual gays and lesbians, drugs addicts, drag queens”) to the Broadway stage and made them commercialized.\textsuperscript{97} The show was able to make social change by including these areas in the middle-class culture. Critics like Miller who have written in detail about \textit{Rent} point out that despite touting a great amount of diversity, the show’s main characters are White, straight cis men from middle-class America, like Larson himself.\textsuperscript{98} While I think this point is good to note, I believe that Americans at that time would only have accepted such a narrator in order to receive the rest of the show positively. I agree with Miller that, in order to encourage audiences to accept Otherness, the story must be told from a comfortable point of view. \textit{Rent}’s diverse casting, structure and content might not be as groundbreaking as some would suggest. However, its popularity as a musical that brought focus to important issues of the time, including AIDS and the artistic counterculture, makes it relevant while understanding that musical theater has worked towards social change.

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{97} Miller, \textit{Rebels with Applause}, 191.
\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 192.
Potential of Musicals

As seen by the small sample above, musicals have the potential to bring attention to society in order to create a change or gain understanding. Most of these trends are created through satire or mirroring real life. By putting situations on a stage to be viewed in the comfort of a seat, the audience is forced to think about ideas for the length of the show, at least. The intention of these musicals is to get the audience to think about the performance after the show, and most likely that is what happened. The problem with the way most musicals go about trying to make change is that there is no action that the audience must take. They are allowed to sit back and be entertained for a couple hours, before going back into their lives with little changed about themselves. As Brecht points out, by giving the audience an emotional release, they leave the show feeling satisfied, without fully changing at all.

However, musical theater has a great deal of potential. As seen through Of Thee I Sing, The Cradle Will Rock, Hair, and Rent, musicals can be used to create social change in different ways. Musicals can act as political satire for an audience to relieve their frustrations at the government. They can bring up a challenge to the current political circumstances, such as the importance of unions. They can speak for a group of people who want to be understood by mainstream America, in order to lessen the amount that the group is ostracized. Musical theater has used these tactics in order to illuminate social problems, but there is still work to be done in working towards real social change. The largest potential of musical theater to create social change relies on its popularity and its large audiences. Throughout this study, I continue to mention productions that have worked towards social change through musical theater, pointing out how different tactics are more or less effective. These examples will help explore the
possibilities of using musical theater for social justice aims, in an effort to discover how musical theater can work in conjunction with theater for social change to make a difference in society.
Witness 3

1. Does *Witness Uganda* influence a group of oppressed people?

To answer that, the question is: who are the oppressed people the show is influencing?

Are the oppressed people in *Witness Uganda* are the Ugandan children involve with the Uganda Project? If that is the case, is a musical the best way to create social justice for them? Is the entire musical simply a way to get butts in the seats in order to raise more money for them through ticket sales, donations, and merchandise?

Or, is it influencing the privileged Americans who hope to go to other countries? The American construct of “helping” in other countries, especially African countries, is problematic. Is *Witness Uganda* trying to subvert the culture around voluntourism? In this way, maybe they are working towards helping liberate the oppressed people through changing the mindsets of the Americans who are perpetuating the problematic mindsets? But which oppressed people? All of Africa? All “third world” or “developing” countries?

So I say again, who are the oppressed people that are being influenced by this show?

And, if the answer is no one, then *Witness Uganda* does not satisfy this point.
Chapter 3: *Witness Uganda* Genesis, Development and Plot

“*That’s kind of what the craft of theater is all about. It’s about putting on a mask and putting on a costume, pretending to be something else so that you can actually reveal something deeper and truer about yourself and all of us.*”

-Matt Gould

When I saw *Witness Uganda* in March 2014, it made a huge impression on me. Immediately after seeing the production, I knew I wanted to write about it and the connections I saw with theater for social change. I thankfully was able to initiate a connection with its creators. I was incredibly moved that a piece of musical theater could bring up ideas that I was studying in my Education courses on social justice by possibly using tactics from theater for social change, which I was taking a course on at the time. I wanted to know more about how the two different theater genres, both of which have deep importance to me, could possibly combine into a single hybrid form. I now believe that *Witness Uganda* is not an example of musical theater for social change with a commercial production, as I had hoped when I began my research. I now realize that such a show may be impossible, but I am interested in the way the musical used aspects of theater for social change in order to create more change in the audience than most pieces of musical theater.

As *Witness Uganda* moved from documentary musical to book musical, it became more commercialized. In fall 2014, the musical was unofficially slated to move to Broadway in a year. Matt Gould expressed that the next step in the process was finding out if the show could exist without being connected to the Uganda Project. The next chapters focus on my case study, *Witness Uganda*. By concentrating on one show, I hope to inform readers how to challenge pieces of musical theater to work for social justice. During my final chapter and conclusion, I

---

99 Matt Gould (co-creator of *Witness Uganda*) in discussion with the author, September 17, 2014.
100 Ibid.
explore other musicals that are using theater for social change and pieces of theater for social change that are using musical theater, giving suggestions for how to create meaningful musical theater that works more explicitly for social justice. By using a single show as a case study, I can illustrate the difficulties and frustrations that come with attempting to do social justice work while still being commercially viable. This chapter looks at the development of *Witness Uganda* from its inception through its opening at the American Repertory Theater. Most of the information is taken from a personal interview I was able to conduct with Matt Gould, a TedTalk Gould presented in 2012, and publicity materials created for *Witness Uganda*. I am interested in the transition of the show from its beginnings through the production at the A.R.T. for this chapter. I was only able to discuss the show with Gould, and therefore cannot speak to what Griffin Matthews’ intentions were when writing the show. I first explore Gould’s shifting goals for the piece and the way they have developed throughout the process of writing the show.

**Genesis of *Witness Uganda***

Matthews’ trip to Uganda in the summer of 2005 was life-changing. After coming home, Matthews worked to collect money in order to send the children he met to school. He started the Uganda Project as a not-for-profit organization to raise funds for the children’s schooling in Uganda. During the economic crisis of 2008, however, Matthews found himself struggling to get the money for the students to attend school, which not only included tuition but also the money for supplies and uniforms. Although the crisis meant less funds, the students needed more money because some were going to university. The yearly budget doubled from $25,000 to $50,000, but “donors weren’t giving anything” and “money was drying up.”101 Gould’s secretly recorded rant

---

would be the first song of *Witness Uganda*. Gould shared a similar experience in aid work and understood the frustrations Matthews was experiencing. He joined the Peace Corps after college, working in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania.  

Both men shared the goal of wanting to make a difference in the world but encountered many roadblocks in pursuing non-problematic aid work.

The music that was written from Matthews’ rant and other interviews about aid work was not meant to be a full-blown musical, but rather a short benefit concert to support the Uganda Project. The songs they created were based on interviews with colleagues about the frustrations of trying to help people without being problematic. The concert provoked emotional responses from the audience members. Many came up to the creators sharing their own experiences with aid work and that they felt similarly frustrated when it comes to making social change. They told Gould, “that is my story, I tried to help and it was hard.”  

After having such a positive response to their work, Gould and Matthews decided to put their musical theater training to good use.

**Witness Uganda as a Documentary Musical**

When they noticed the reactions of their audience members, Gould and Matthews decided to write a full musical. In its earlier stages, *Witness Uganda* was not a book musical. They chose to write the show as a “documentary musical.” They planned to take the interviews and “weave music through that text and elevate [the] words into a musical experience.” The show began working towards social change, using a format typical of

---

102 “Witness Uganda: Matt Gould at TEDxWallStreet,” YouTube video, 16:05, Posted by TEDx Talks, April 12, 2012, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k19yr7v_B4o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k19yr7v_B4o).
103 Ibid.
104 Ibid.
105 Gould, discussion.
documentary plays to attempt to make a change in the audience. Gould was interested in the way music could effect the audience using real words from the interviews in a theatrical setting.\textsuperscript{106}

The documentary play was an important element at the beginning of the process. In a poster for the original benefit concert of \textit{Witness Uganda}, the show claimed to be the first documentary musical.\textsuperscript{107} While there are other productions that also use the title of documentary musical or documusical, I am choosing not to focus on them because Gould and Matthews clearly did not use them as examples of their work if they claimed to be the world’s first documusical, and furthermore, the documusicals I have looked at did not have overt social justice goals. The other documusicals, such as \textit{Sondheim on Sondheim: A Docu-musical} (2010) and \textit{Steve: A Documusical} (2013), were using the word documentary differently from the way documentary plays use the word. Gould used the work of Anna Deavere Smith and Tectonic Theater Project as inspirations for using the documentary play format.\textsuperscript{108} Anna Deavere Smith makes theater pieces based on interviews, playing many characters and speaking their actual words in order to play them truthfully. One of her most famous pieces, \textit{Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities} (1992), focuses on the Crown Heights riots in Brooklyn in the 1990’s between the Black and Hassidic Jewish community members. She imitates the mannerisms and vocal qualities of many different people in order to create the show. Smith desired to “capture the personality of a place by attempting to embody its varied population and varied points of view in one person,” meaning herself.\textsuperscript{109} Tectonic used a similar process to create \textit{The Laramie Project} (2000), a play written using text from interviews around

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{106} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{108} Gould, discussion.
\end{itemize}
the case of Matthew Shepard who was kidnapped, severely beaten and left to die tied to a fence outside of Laramie, Wyoming. The play is constructed from 200 interviews as a “chronicle of the life of the town of Laramie in the year after the murder” and is now one of the most performed in America. In both instances, the documentary play style was used in order to bring up social justice issues around a specific community. Interestingly, both plays had commercial success outside the communities that were represented. In this way, the plays function as examples of the documentary musical style that could have been successfully used for Witness Uganda.

Gould was interested in finding a way to “actually literally musicalize what it is that [interviewees] were saying.” While Oh What a Lovely War, the documentary play written by Joan Littlewood about World War I, did incorporate music and singing into the documentary play format, the show used songs as other preexisting texts, rather than original music. Gould and Matthews were incorporating music that they created in order to set the mood and establish themes for the show. They also worked to make text that was not originally “musicalized” (to use Gould’s word) into lyrics. This difference was innovative because most shows that use the documentary style, like Oh What a Lovely War, use preexisting songs as texts themselves, rather than using original music with preexisting language. Changing spoken text into lyrics was an appealing choice that I think would have created an interesting collaboration between musical theater and theater for social change. However, Gould and Matthews decided that the documentary play style did not work well with trying to add original music, and instead began to transition the documentary musical into a book musical.

---

111 Gould, discussion.
112 Ibid.
The Switch to *Witness Uganda* as a Book Musical

As the show continued to be developed, the documentary play style became increasingly difficult to maintain. Gould found that only giving “facts and figures” was limiting the ability of the piece to have wider appeal, saying, “the idea of staying literally tied to people’s words, it fully limited our telling a larger story that we felt like we wanted to be able to tell.”\(^{113}\) In his opinion, theatrical devices found in book musicals better enable performers and audiences alike to learn, “pretending to be something else so that you can actually reveal something deeper and truer about yourself and all of us.”\(^{114}\) I believe that, while it is true that putting a clear story on stage can help reach a deeper conclusion about society, theater for social change proves that theater does not need to be pretend in order to create change and reach deeper meaning. In the end, Gould acknowledged that it was hard to stick to the structure and still engage with the themes in the way that they had hoped. He said:

Musical theater, I feel like, lends itself extremely well and powerfully to really intense subject matter like aid work or, like, faith and homosexuality and like war. But I think that at a certain point, when you sort of begin a development process, you kind of have to make a choice between like are we trying to do sort of a weird like totally weird out of the box thing that’s gonna happen in weird downtown theaters or are we trying to make something that is commercial that could have really vast wide appeal. And I think that, as we started to decide, you know, how large an audience we hoped we might be able to reach, we decided that we were going to need to structure the piece in a way that was accessible, was really accessible to audiences who go and see musicals.\(^{115}\)

Clearly, Gould was looking to make something that was commercially viable to a large audience in the hopes of increasing its accessibility. To do that, he felt that a more typical style of writing, such as the book musical, would be more successful. He said, “we were going to need to create something that was exciting, compelling, that had a beginning, middle, and an end and to really

\(^{113}\) Ibid.
\(^{114}\) Ibid.
\(^{115}\) Ibid.
take people on a journey they could have an experience with.” The switch from a documentary musical to a book musical allowed for the creators to have more artistic license with the show. They were able to tell a complete story that could engender more empathy from the audience than facts and figures. Based on the success of *Fires in the Mirror* and *The Laramie Project*, I do not believe that it is harder to create empathic audiences for documentary plays; however, the change meant that they could bend the truth in order to hopefully uncover more about the human experience.

Because both Gould and Matthews are trained in musical theater, they were familiar with the form of the book musical. While writing the show, they took inspiration from some big names in musical theater, Richard Rogers & Oscar Hammerstein II and Stephen Sondheim. They based *Witness Uganda* on the book musical structure that was created and perfected by Rogers, Hammerstein, and Sondheim. These artists made musicals that were about difficult topics, like love, war, and racism. Being able to use the book musical model, with a clear beginning, middle, and end, was helpful in Gould’s process because it allowed him to follow a model with which he was familiar. They presented the show at the Disney/ASCAP musical theater workshop in 2010. *Witness Uganda* then won the Richard Rogers Production Award for Musical Theater in 2014. Through the workshop and with the funds from the award, Matthews and Gould were able to receive a slot in the A.R.T’s 2014 season. Through this

---

116 Ibid.
117 Ibid.
118 Ibid.
119 Carly Schwartz, “‘Witness Uganda’ is Destined to Be a Broadway Hit (And It’s Also Making the World a Better Place),” *The Huffington Post*, March 11, 2014.
recognition, it is clear that those who are in charge of these awards respected the way the Gould and Matthews used the book musical form.

**Plot of Witness Uganda**

*Witness Uganda* starts with a musical prologue and a video flash-forward to a scene near the end of the second act where Jacob calls Griffin in a panic.\(^{121}\) As the lights come up, Griffin (the character, played by Griffin Matthews as a fictionalized version of himself) begins by saying “My name is Griffin, and this is my story.” After being kicked out of his church choir for being gay, Griffin decides that he will go to Uganda in order to learn about himself and make a change in the world. He tries to convince his best friend, Ryan, a female singer-songwriter, to join him, but she decides to move to Nashville to start a singing career.\(^{122}\) In Uganda, Griffin meets the unhappy Ugandan worker Joy and her cautious brother, Jacob, befriending Jacob not long after arriving. Soon after, he learns from Jacob that Pastor Jim, the invisible but omnipresent leader of the organization, is corrupt and has been selling the buildings meant to be schools as regular real estate once the volunteers leave. Griffin decides to explore the village rather than build for Pastor Jim, running into a group of orphans who quickly befriend Griffin. They ask him to be their teacher because they cannot afford schooling. He begins to teach them important lessons such as ‘I am someone that the world should not miss’ and to follow their ambitions to be doctors or social workers.\(^{123}\)

---


\(^{122}\) Ibid.

Ryan decides to join Griffin in Uganda after some unhappy encounters in Nashville, but their plans to teach the orphans are ruined as Pastor Jim attempts to stop the make-shift school from continuing. Griffin fears for the students and decides to put them into a school and pay for their education. He and Ryan head back to New York to begin to raise money for the orphans. They find it extremely difficult to get enough money for the kids and Griffin realizes that he must ask his church for help. They welcome him back and sing the moving ballad “Be The Light.” Griffin gets a distress call from Jacob, asking for money after being kidnapped. Griffin and Ryan spend all of their money rushing to Uganda to save Jacob, only to find out that he lied to get the money. Although they dejectedly return to the States after being deceived, they realize that their efforts have not been wasted on the orphans who now have an education that would have been impossible without them. The show ends with mixed emotions: Griffin is upset about the fact that he could not help Jacob but pleased that the orphans were able to succeed in their lives.124

At the end of every performance of *Witness Uganda* at the A.R.T., there was a post-show discussion called Act III. Act III happened directly after the curtain call ended, with a couple minutes in between for the cast to change and the uninterested audience members to leave the theater. During the performance that I saw, I was able to see Gould and Matthews talk about their experiences and discuss the recent anti-gay laws in Uganda. Naming the discussion Act III and having it occur directly after the performance in the same space allowed the event to exist as part of the show as opposed to happening in addition to the show. Keeping the show related to the world through a discussion right after the performance allows the audience to make associations between the story in the performance and current events in real life. Act III is one of

124 Ibid.
the most important reasons that I see a connection between *Witness Uganda* and theater for social change. In theater for social change, post-show discussions are used to talk about the issues raised in performance and in what ways they pertain to the community. *Witness Uganda*’s Act III was similar in that the issues brought up in the performance, such as the complexities of aid work, privatized education or the anti-gay laws in Uganda, could be discussed directly after the audience experienced the show. Gould discussed that some aspects of the Act III structure will hopefully transition into the possible Broadway run.125

*Witness Uganda* has gone through several stages of development, and these stages of development have different connections to theater for social change. As a benefit concert for the Uganda Project, the performance was working towards social change more than it was a theatrical performance. As the show became more codified, it was similar to *Oh What a Lovely War* in style, where characters existed but the storytelling was focused on texts from interviews rather than a singular storyline. In that iteration, I consider the show to be an interesting collaboration of musical theater and theater for social change. Once the show turned into a book musical, however, the theater for social change aspects became more abstracted. The addition of Act III, however, adds an aspect of theater for social change to the production at the A.R.T. that did not exist in the documentary musical version. In later chapters, I look at other productions that have overcome similar difficulties in order to work harder for social justice and how *Witness Uganda* already used certain aspects of theater for social change in different iterations of the show. Before delving into comparisons, theory, and hypotheticals, however, I discuss the social justice issues brought up in *Witness Uganda*.

125 Gould, discussion.
Witness 4

2. Does *Witness Uganda* use performance as action?

Once again, there is a question as to what type of action is intended.

One action that occurs is an increase in funds for the Uganda Project. I think that here, the show does effectively create action through performance. Anytime an audience member sees the show, their ticket money helps the children in Uganda who are part of the organization.

There could also be the second action of influencing the preconceived notions about aid work (specifically in Uganda/Africa) that the show works to change.

I think *Witness Uganda* satisfies this point.
Chapter 4: Social Justice in *Witness Uganda*

“When we started I felt clear, it was supposed to be something that I was supposed to share with people, and other people were supposed to share with people, and they were supposed to share with people, about the simplicity of helping.”  

- Griffin Matthews

This quote from Griffin Matthews is part of a monologue interspersed with singing in Lugandan, which translates to “I am not rich, but that doesn’t matter. I want to make a change, help me change.”

The song, “Kyussa,” was part of the beginning seeds of *Witness Uganda*, when it was a documentary musical that used interviews as the only texts of the piece. During the process of creating *Witness Uganda*, the text changed. The original monologue discussed “the simplicity of helping,” but as the show continued, the phrase turned into “the complexities of trying to help.”

In this chapter, I discuss the issues that are dealt with in the American Repertory Theater’s production of *Witness Uganda*. I give a summary of the current research on the social justice issues the musical explores. This scholarly research is followed by a discussion of the ways cultural capital plays a role in the performances of *Witness Uganda*. After offering a theoretical framework for discussing these issues, I situate the topics in relationship to text from *Witness Uganda*.

**Social Justice Issues**

*Witness Uganda* works to bring awareness to the complexities of aid work. There are many problematic philosophies behind aid work. Aid work is not necessarily a good thing,

---

126 “*Witness Uganda*: Matt Gould at TEDxWallStreet,” YouTube video, 16:05, Posted by TEDx Talks, April 12, 2012, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k19yr7v_B4o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k19yr7v_B4o).
127 Ibid.
128 Ibid.
especially when done by inexperienced Westerners whose goal is not social justice as much as it is to have an impressive line on their resume or some pictures of cute African orphans on Facebook. The word “help” itself implies hierarchical thinking. Herein lies one of the problems with Western humanitarianism. While humanitarian organizations may attempt to provide help in other countries, the volunteers who are working for them are usually untrained in aid work and are there on short trips. Multimedia journalist Coleen Jose writes, “real humanitarianism goes beyond orphanages and efforts to stamp out poverty in two- to three-week trips.”

Most programs make little difference and do not work to truly understand the cultural context in which the organization operates. When he arrived in Uganda, Matthews could have been categorized with other people who knew nothing about the country they wanted to improve. It took effort and time in Uganda before Matthews would be able to do aid work without being problematic.

Recently more and more people have started to speak out about the issues surrounding aid work. Philippa Biddle is a young writer, speaker, entrepreneur and a Youth Representative to the UN for the Jane Goodall Institute. Biddle is also an organizer of Campamento Esperanza y Alegria (a summer camp in the Dominican Republic for HIV+ children). She realized the problems inherent in most aid organizations during high school. After going to Tanzania through a school group to build libraries (that she later found out had to be rebuilt every night, as she and her friends did not know how to build a library) and working at the camp in the Dominican Republic, it became clear to Biddle that something was not working.

---


131 Ibid.
Biddle realized that her presence was not a “godsend as [she] was coached by non-profits, documentaries, and service programs to believe it would be.”132 She explains that the work they were doing was not bad, but it was her being there that was bad. As a privileged White American, Biddle was not contributing in the most positive ways. For the money that she spent to attend a program in Africa, an African could be paid to be doing the work that she was attempting and be more successful. Instead of hoping that “a little girl in Ghana or Sri Lanka or Indonesia” would “think of [Biddle] when she wakes up each morning…for her education or medical care or new clothes,” Biddle wanted to contribute funds that would provide these children teachers or community leaders to look up to and thank.133 Biddle wants this imaginary girl to “have a hero who she can relate to – who looks like her, is part of her culture, speaks her language, and who she might bump into on the way to school one morning.”134 She insists, “taking part in international aid where you aren’t particularly helpful in not benign, it’s detrimental…and perpetuates the ‘White savior’ complex that…has haunted both the countries we are trying to ‘save’ and our own psyches.”135 Along with Jose, Biddle believes that the key to aid work is to be informed and culturally aware in order to create long-term solutions. Matthews’ experiences in Uganda most likely prompted a similar realization, encouraging him to create lasting change with a small group of people instead of attempting to make change where he did not have a relationship with the community.

While there are many organizations that are doing important work to improve the world that we live in, there are also many organizations, like the one that Matthews attended back in

133 Ibid.
134 Ibid.
135 Ibid.
2005, that are nothing more than voluntourism. These organizations uphold the type of attitudes about aid work that Jose and Biddle are against. A voluntourist, according to *Al Jazeera America* correspondent Rafia Zakaria, is someone who wants to put together an exotic vacation with volunteering. The choices are all basically same: “wealthy Westerners can do a little good, experience something that their affluent lives do not offer, and…have a story to tell that places them in the ranks of the kindhearted and worldly wise.”\(^{136}\) The biggest problem with voluntouring, Zakaria says, is that there is a “singular focus on the volunteer’s quest for experience, as opposed to the recipient community’s actual needs.”\(^{137}\)

Building schools and libraries is great to make Americans feel better about themselves and post some pictures on Facebook while hugging orphans, but in the end they forget to take into consideration the context and needs of the people who will actually be effected once the voluntourists leave. Zakria continues, “the lack of knowledge of other cultures makes them easier to help,” instead of Americans working to improve their own communities in need.\(^{138}\)

*Witness Uganda* works to bring up these ideas during the show. As I go on to analyze how the show works towards social justice aims, it is important to recognize that the show is coming from a Western context, performed for a Western audience.

**Cultural Capital in Theater for Social Change**

The Bourdieusian concept of cultural capital describes things, resources or knowledge that are imbued with higher status. Increasing cultural capital can help someone who is underprivileged improve their position in life, but in most contexts, cultural capital is held by


\(^{137}\) Ibid.

\(^{138}\) Ibid.
privileged people, giving them an even higher status as compared to the underprivileged. While cultural capital is not the same as money (i.e. financial capital), it does have an inherent value that connects it to financial capital. This value comes from the fact that, in most instances, ownership of a certain type of cultural capital implies financial wealth. For instance, a person who knows how to play golf has the cultural capital of being able to play golf because it can be implied that the person was wealthy enough to take golf lessons. Programs working to give cultural capital to the underprivileged might offer free golf lessons, in order to allow the underprivileged the ability to have access to the cultural capital associated with knowing how to play golf without needing the financial capital that gives the cultural capital its value in the first place. The implied value of cultural capital normally must be exchanged for money, but when other means of exchange are arranged, cultural capital can be attained by the underprivileged in order to raise their status.

It is important to recognize the significance of cultural capital when analyzing theater for social change, both in terms of participants and audience members. The type of cultural capital that is held by those involved in the performance drastically alters the amount and type of change that can be made through the show. In the case of Witness Uganda, I am assuming that the audience members were privileged. The performers were also fairly privileged, especially compared to the Ugandan people that they are portraying on stage. It is crucial to keep in mind the status and privilege possessed by the creators, Gould and Matthews, as compared to those they are writing about, the children involved in the Uganda Project. These differences in cultural

---

139 The privilege of being an American does come with many advantages, such as free (although not always equal) education and the right to free speech. Comparatively to those in Uganda, the cast members are all privileged. However, it is important to remember intersectionality when thinking about the privilege of the different cast members, many of whom are less privileged because of their race, class, sexuality, etc.
capital between the writers and the subjects seems potentially problematic to me because their voices are being told through a privileged lens towards a possibly ignorant audience.

Social Change in *Witness Uganda*

As I discuss in Chapter Five, many of the reviewers of the A.R.T. production recognized that there was some part of *Witness Uganda* that interacted with the idea of social change. Some felt that the show succeeded in its goal, while others thought that the show was detrimental to the cause. While there are some problematic approaches to the show, it ultimately brings up the important questions that it intended to ask of its audiences. All of the reviewers were able to identify that the show was exploring the complexities of aid work and the way Americans relate to the rest of the world. When all reviews comment on the same theme, it is clear that the basic question that was being investigated was well-defined within the production. The show created questions in the audience members’ minds, which is important when dealing with topics that do not have clean-cut explanations or conclusions.

Two songs have particular connections to the complexities of doing aid work, attempting to help people in other countries, and making social change. “Kyussa” and “Bricks” appear at the beginning of the first and second acts, respectively. “Kyussa” was part of the original documentary musical that was created in order to raise money for the Uganda Project. Kyussa translates to “change” in Lugandan. ¹⁴⁰ In its earlier iterations, such as the version that was performed at TEDxWallStreet, the monologue talked about the “simplicity of helping.”¹⁴¹ By the time the musical was performed at the A.R.T. however, the song discussed “the complexity of

¹⁴⁰ “Witness Uganda FULL PERFORMANCE on WERS,” YouTube video.
Griffin’s monologue discusses that his start in aid work was problematic but that he began to see a difference that made him want to continue working towards change:

My name is Griffin and this is my story. I went to Uganda in the summer of 2005 to volunteer. I didn’t know what to expect, I’ve never been to Uganda, I am not Ugandan. My grandmother is from Pittsburgh. I stepped into a culture I knew nothing about. Yes, my skin was the same but our lives were completely different. I lie in bed at night and think to myself what if I never met those kids? What if I never got on that plane? How different would my life be like? Sometimes I want to be like forget it all. But I still see their faces. I still hear their voices. Someone in Uganda once told me God’s not gonna show you the full story of your life because you wouldn’t be able to handle it. Because if I had known then what I know now about the complexity of helping, I probably wouldn’t have gone.

Griffin points out that he knew nothing about the culture he entered, something that is typical of voluntourism. When he began to work with the children there and started an organization that worked specifically with people he knew in a place that he worked to understand, it was impossible for him to stop doing the difficult work. Later in the number, he sings “I wanna know more, I wanna see more...What’s my place on this planet, how do I fit in?” The song captures the difficult questions that aid workers must face when attempting to understand how to make change in the world without being problematic.

In “Bricks,” as quoted in the epigraph, Griffin is grappling with how to discuss aid work in the United States where aid is almost only discussed in terms of funding, rather than the social change that the aid is promoting. He talks about being asked if they are building schools in Uganda. He responds that they are not building schools, because they have the buildings but with privatized education, it is difficult for children to afford getting an education. He continues, “we

142 “Witness Uganda FULL PERFORMANCE on WERS,” YouTube video.
143 Ibid.
144 Ibid.
always in the West assume that aid can only be tied to dollars. Like you have to be giving people money and they have to be building something or whatever they are doing with the money. And you have to be able to...count it and track it and count it and track it.” The song suggests the idea that aid work should be focused on “trying to resurrect people” as opposed to buildings. The lyrics attempt to change the way the audience thinks about aid work. Instead of thinking that aid work is all about the money that is going to an organization, the song presents the idea that aid work should be about making real change with the people in the community being “helped” rather than just creating infrastructure that does not truly influence the people living there.

In coming to a personal conclusion about the way that Matthews and Gould approached the deep questions in their show, I recall a monologue from the character Joy. As a worker at the aid compound, she has become cold and hard towards the idea that Americans who come to volunteer could actually make any change. She says to Griffin, “they come to Uganda because it makes them feel like they have seen our poverty and held our children, but I know that it is because they are selfish. They take a picture but do they give it? Do they send it? No, because they have it and they are satisfied. So I give them what they want for the sake of filling our libraries with their books and our bellies with their money, but I can’t love them.” Joy puts on an act for the volunteers, making her voice high pitched and sweet, smiling a silly smile, and pretending that she is incredibly grateful that they have changed her life and she could not do anything without them. But after they leave, she forgets about them because she knows that they are not capable of making any change to her life after being in Uganda for a month.

145 Ibid.
In Joy’s monologue, and her character in general, I see the complexities of aid work played out. While no one comes out and says the words written by Rafia Zakaria, Philippa Biddle, or any others who are spreading awareness of the troubles of voluntourism, the production is asking the audience to question their beliefs of how aid work functions in our globalized world. While the show ends on a positive note, Griffin realizes that aid work is not always easy or simple. He first experiences this through the corrupt Pastor Jim and then again as he attempts to raise money and has trouble finding sponsors. While writing the show and getting ready for the production, Gould and Matthews tried to stay accurate to the world that they had experienced in Uganda. In order to try to stay as culturally accurate as possible, Associate Director Shira Milikowsky joined Matthews and Gould in their yearly trip to Uganda. She used this trip to prepare for the show, because, as she says, “really this show is about an American person’s experience in Uganda, so having been through that emotional journey I could say ‘well, this is what it felt like to me walking down the street of the village.”147 On a more basic level, Milikowsky was able to buy and bring back suitcases of props for the show. The show was created with authenticity in mind, by people who have experienced the cultural landscape first-hand, as well as the real-life complexities of aid work.

In real life, Matthews and Gould practice well-informed aid work. Instead of trying to change the entire country of Uganda with a couple schools, they focus on influencing the lives of ten children in a realistic way. By sending them to school, they are in fact making social change. By going to Uganda at least once a year, they work to understand the cultural context that their students are living in, rather than sending money and hoping for the best. The Uganda Project

does aid work in a way that is not voluntourism but makes a conscious effort to effect a small
group of people in a tangible and important way. Although there are always solutions to make a
piece of theater clearer in its message, the ambiguity of Witness Uganda helps the audience
approach its questions with active minds. The show would have been more problematic if it gave
a clear message about needing to help African children and save the world because that mindset
is problematic. Instead of handing the audience a clear-cut answer, they force the audience to
question preconceived notions and hopefully go on to make their own conclusions.
3. Does *Witness Uganda* focus on a specific community?

Here is where it gets tricky.

The show’s main character is Griffin. But does the show focus on the *community* that Griffin belongs to? For his identity as a cis-man, Black, gay, Christian, activist? Which of these communities is being spoken to?

If it isn’t Griffin’s community, then which community? Ugandans? Aids workers?

Americans with problematic ideas about aid work? They are in the audience, but then where is the character that fits that community?

Are any of the audience members in this community?

The answers are all very unclear at this point.

I don’t think that *Witness Uganda* truly focuses on a specific community.

Therefore, *Witness Uganda* does not fulfill this point.
Chapter 5: Reception and Critique of *Witness Uganda*

“If their combined efforts introduce young people to musical theater, or motivate one person to become a witness in their own community, they will be making a difference even as they are making art.”

-Nancy Grossman

The production of *Witness Uganda* at the American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, MA brought up issues that are important in the fight for social justice, including that the idea of helping is not as simple as it may appear. In this chapter, I analyze the reviews of the production, pointing out the merits of different opinions and how they connect. I explore contributors other than Griffin Matthews and Matt Gould that influenced the production. *Witness Uganda*’s production at the A.R.T. is not a production of musical theater for social change, but the show tackles questions that are focused on social justice, forcing the audience to leave the theater questioning the world around them. By evaluating reviews as well as offering my own critique, I put forth many examples of the way audience members received *Witness Uganda* and when ideas discussed in Chapter Four were activated in performance.

*Witness Uganda* received mixed reviews for its production at the A.R.T. The positive reviews described the show as an emotional rollercoaster that leaves audiences in tears for the right reasons. While describing the song “Be the Light,” Sandy MacDonald of *The Boston Globe* states, “This is just one of the many moments where you’re apt to find tears springing to your eyes. The others are harder to chart or anticipate. Perhaps because Gould and Matthews don’t play up the pathos – they’re just telling a true story, honestly and artfully – it’s all the more

---

overwhelming when it catches you unawares.” Although MacDonald wrongly believes that the show is a completely true story, rather than a story based off Griffin’s story, it is clear that the way it was presented was meaningful to her. The difference between “just telling a true story” and based on a true story may seem inconsequential, but it is important to the way the audience is expected to feel throughout the show. The difference is the emotional journey that “catches you unawares” and “[springs] tears to your eyes.” Gould discussed that the switch from documentary musical to book musical was to “really take people on a journey.” Although the show did succeed in taking the audience on an emotional ride and it was influenced by the fact that the performance was seen as representing a true story, I wonder if the same effect could have been achieved without slightly misleading audience members.

Is it more important for audience members to have an emotional release at the end of the play, enhanced by shifting the true story somewhat, or to give them an accurate account of the organization that they are hopefully going to donate to at the end of the play? Gould stated that the performances at the A.R.T. raised more money for the Uganda Project than any benefit concert of Witness Uganda as a documentary musical. Perhaps that is the answer, especially if the goals were to bring the audience on an emotional ride and also raise money for the Uganda Project. But I argue that allowing the audience an emotional release at the end of the performance does less to encourage the audiences to think about the themes in the show.

---

150 Ibid.
151 Ibid.
152 Matt Gould (co-creator of Witness Uganda) in discussion with the author, September 17, 2014.
153 Ibid.
Brechtian theory claims that “[providing] him [i.e. audience members] with sensations” conflicts with a performance’s ability to “[force] him [i.e. audience members] to take decisions.”154 The emotional journey Gould aimed for could be taking away the crucial social change goals that are brought up in the show. The show is dealing with these complex ideas in thoughtful ways, but if the audience is feeling fulfilled at the conclusion of the show Brecht believes that the audience is less likely to further the conversation outside of the theater. I agree with Brecht in that Witness Uganda made audiences feel an emotional release, which makes people less motivated to discuss the ideas in the piece and instigate change.

Other reviews mentioned that the music, composed and conducted by Matt Gould, was the best part of the show. In Carolyn Clay’s review for TheaterMania, she comments that “the core of Witness Uganda is its score, awash in African rhythms, now joyous, now ominous and angry.”155 Nancy Grossman, for BroadwayWorld.com, echoes this sentiment, saying that “Witness Uganda is at its best when the Gould-conducted band fires up.”156 These reviews, along with MacDonald’s in The Boston Globe, are generally positive. Grossman calls it “an electrifying production that combines stellar design elements, breathtaking choreography, and an ensemble of energetic young artists committed to telling their story.”157 I wholeheartedly agree with this assessment of the music. With African drums pounding and the ensemble belting their faces off, it is hard not to be energized by the music in the show. I left the performance singing all of the catchy melodies and, over a year later, still found them stuck in my head. Other

156 Grossman, review of Witness Uganda.
157 Ibid.
audience members, as captured by the A.R.T.’s audience reaction video, could not stop raving about the music after leaving the performance as well.\textsuperscript{158}

Although Clay mentions that the production “stretches the limits of what you can make a musical out of – there are times when it veers dangerously close to ‘What I Did on My Summer Vacation While Finding and Accepting Myself,’” she gives a generally positive review of the production and the performers.\textsuperscript{159} These positive reviews probably give a good sense of how many audience members viewed the performance: a true story that told an emotional tale with beautiful music, well-acted material and energetic dancing.\textsuperscript{160} Without analyzing the show for its ability to create social change, I agree that the show was very successful. Darrell Grant Moultrie’s choreography was engaging and felt authentic, although as a person who has never been to Uganda before, it is impossible for me to comment on the authenticity of the movements. Peter Nigrini’s projection design, especially in relationship to Tom Pye’s set design, worked well to portray the different settings. Pye’s moving platform was especially effective in physically altering the landscape of the show while not letting the set design distract from the action of the play.

Other reviewers were not quite as pleased with the choices made in the production as those I have mentioned. Ed Siegel, for the \textit{ARTery}, felt as though the plot was “melodramatic” and the “Gould-Matthews creative balloon” could not sustain the story they were telling.\textsuperscript{161} Some, like student Emma Adler of \textit{The Harvard Crimson}, thought the libretto did not do

\textsuperscript{159} Clay, review of \textit{Witness Uganda}.
\textsuperscript{160} “Audience reactions to ‘Witness Uganda’ at A.R.T.,” YouTube video.

70
material justice and suffered from “a lack of depth.”\textsuperscript{162} Like the more positive reviews, Adler felt the strength of the show was in its score, but she thought the writing needed some work. She writes, “Act One in particular brims with platitudes and while the characters’ dialogue is realistic, their conversations serve little purpose other than to do what the songs don’t – advance the plot. As a result, character development takes a backseat. [Most of] the characters in \textit{Witness Uganda} are resolutely two-dimensional.”\textsuperscript{163} Bill Marx, writing for the \textit{Arts Fuse}, felt as though the show had “geysers of empowerment clichés.” He describes the show as a “feel-good story” with “lively if showbiz-y conviction.”\textsuperscript{164} These reviews are looking for \textit{Witness Uganda} to have a different style. I feel as though these critics were looking for more depth in a show that was already dealing with heavy material. Gould and Matthews could have made the choice to make the show darker and less up-lifting, but their choice was to take the audience on an emotional ride, ending on a positive note. That does not seem like a poor choice, especially if they hoped to get donations afterwards. Usually, an organization wants people to know that they are doing a good job and succeeding at their goal while asking for money. If \textit{Witness Uganda} was less uplifting and empowering at the end, it would give the sense that the Uganda Project was not succeeding, which probably would not get many donations. As a performance initially written to assist the organization, these choices seem to appropriate.

\textsuperscript{162} Emma Adler, review of \textit{Witness Uganda}, by Matt Gould and Griffin Matthews, directed by Diane Paulus, American Repertory Theater, Cambridge. \textit{The Harvard Crimson}, February 15, 2014, \url{http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2014/2/15/art-witness-uganda-review/}. Although this article is from a student paper, Adler brings up important points that I agree with and feel are worth noting.

\textsuperscript{163} Ibid.


71
The more negative reviews were also disappointed in the way the show handled the ideas of aid work. Adler felt as though there were “elements of the piece that point toward the kind of exploitative, simplistic representation of an African nation that no one wants to endorse,” a sentiment I believe Gould and Matthews are generally working against in their aid work. In particular, she felt that use of a chorus was detrimental to the production. She writes:

The dance numbers were mesmerizing, but the namelessness of the dancers that comprise the ensemble is problematic. They not only move as one but also seem to think and act as one. When they appear in non-musical scenes, their actions and expressions are uncomfortably uniform. The issue is not improper handling of the chorus; choruses, by their very nature, tend toward de-individualization. But in *Witness Uganda*, this sometimes seems to promote an uncomfortably simplistic image of the Ugandan people. As a consequence, a serious musical about Uganda, written by a Westerner for a Western audience, probably should not include a chorus, period.166

Adler’s frustration echoes Marx’s comment that *Witness Uganda* is “a work of cultural tourism that condemns cultural tourism.” Marx felt as though the show did not keep the focus it tried to have. He writes, “early on, the show purports to be about something real: it will explore the complexities of international aid, the dicey difficulties of helping others around the world. But it turns out there is nothing very complicated or disturbing.” I agree with these criticisms of *Witness Uganda*. When confronting a topic as multifaceted and challenging as the complexities of aid work, it is important to avoid being problematic in performance. Although I do see that the use of a chorus is indeed helpful for the performance, I would be interested in how the idea of de-individualization could be subverted. If this subversion was not possible, it would have been interesting to have the namelessness of the chorus pointed out in some way, in order to call attention to the issue at hand. With so many social issues being tackled during the show, it is

165 Adler, review of *Witness Uganda*.
166 Ibid.
167 Marx, review of *Witness Uganda*.
168 Ibid.
understandable that not all issues can be brought up without the show becoming oversaturated with ideas. However, with these important issues at the core of the show, it is important to be cognizant of the way different aspects of the show may be working against the intended message.

Reviewers had mixed responses to the way director Diane Paulus was integrated into the process as well. Grossman thought Paulus “shows her flair for guiding a complex production and getting the best from her performers.” Marx, on the other hand, felt that she crafted “broad performances” with an “emphasis on clarity rather than nuance.” MacDonald and Siegel are both pleased with Paulus’ work, although both mention that her job was mostly to shape the story with minimal but “sure” and “effective strokes.” MacDonald also comments that Paulus was able to conjure the atmosphere of Africa with the ecstatic choreography and the richly layered music. I agree with Marx that Paulus’ directing encouraged broad performances, although I think that musical theater tends to lean towards broad performance styles in general. I would argue that the clarity that Marx comments on is the same simplicity that MacDonald and Siegel perceive as Paulus’ minimal amounts of directing.

Andrea Shea’s article for the ARTery includes an interview with Paulus about her thoughts on the production. Paulus felt as though the show “completely defies the traditions of what you would expect from a piece of musical theater.” She was very impressed by the music and the African-influenced sound that Gould created. For Paulus, the show “asks tough

---

170 Marx, review of Witness Uganda.
171 MacDonald, review of Witness Uganda.
172 Siegel, review of Witness Uganda.
173 MacDonald, review of Witness Uganda.
questions, is timely and is engaging new audiences.”\textsuperscript{175} Paulus’ accomplishment at the A.R.T.
has been creating performances that are made for engaging new audiences. In an article about
Paulus written at the beginning of her role at the A.R.T., Patrick Healy wrote, “as a theater
director, Diane Paulus is a proud populist. What does that mean exactly? For Ms. Paulus it
involves creating shows that appeal to the mainstream as well as theater snobs, and blurring the
line between viewers and actors.”\textsuperscript{176} With Tony-winning musicals like \textit{Hair} and \textit{Pippin}
following a similar populist view, it is not surprising to me that her directorial style is apparent in
\textit{Witness Uganda}. The choice to produce \textit{Witness Uganda} seems to come from an urge to bring
up timely yet difficult questions for audiences that might not always attend the theater. Paulus
strives towards a theater that is made for everyone, but by trying to appeal to the masses, what
nuances get left behind? By creating a piece of musical theater that could bring in audience
members, did the show lose the elements that “completely [defied] the traditions of what you
would expect from a piece of musical theater”?\textsuperscript{177}

Ultimately, these reviews of \textit{Witness Uganda} represent a wide spectrum of responses to
the show. Some allowed themselves to be taken on the emotional journey and found that it was
an extremely moving piece of theater. Others were looking for more in terms of the social issues
that were brought up. As I left the theater, I was extremely moved by the piece and interested in
the way the social issues were tackled through the book musical format. The piece was inspiring
to me, not necessarily inspiring me to make change in terms of aid work but in terms of using
musical theater to instigate change. While I do not think that that type of change was the

\textsuperscript{175} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{177} Shea, review of \textit{Witness Uganda}. 

intention of creating this piece, it is important to see how social change can be created in different ways.
Witness 6

4. Does *Witness Uganda* intend to increase social justice?

I believe that Matt Gould and Griffin Matthews want to increase social justice through their lives. I believe that they began creating *Witness Uganda* as a tool to increase social justice for the children involved in the Uganda Project.

So, if we are merely talking about intentions, which we must, because in the field of theater for social change, it is impossible to truly know what the outcome of a project will be and if the intended changes will in fact be successful, *Witness Uganda* fits this point.

An important side note: I also believe that somewhere along the way, this original intention of increasing social justice got mixed into the shuffle of many conflicting ideas. The idea that becoming more mainstream in order to reach a larger audience and therefore create more social change means that the original community/group of oppressed people involved in the process seems to become less important. Even if the intention does not sway, the message becomes cluttered and unclear.
Chapter 6: Tactics for Making Social Change in Theater

“Community-based performance is thus a local act in two senses: a social doing in one's particular corner of the world and an artistic framing of that doing for others to appreciate.”

-Jan Cohen-Cruz\textsuperscript{178}

Thus far, I have discussed how \textit{Witness Uganda} could work as a show that promotes social change and the level of success creators Matt Gould and Griffin Matthews found in their attempt. It seems clear to me that one of the struggles in creating \textit{Witness Uganda} and bringing it to the American Repertory Theater has been truly identifying what type of change the audience should be experiencing. Based on ticket prices (which ranged from $25 to over $65), it can be assumed that most of the people attending the performances were socioeconomically privileged.\textsuperscript{179} Because it was performed in Boston, a significantly White Northeastern city, it can also be assumed that most of the audience members were racially privileged.\textsuperscript{180} The demographics of the audiences provide us with some information on the amount of privilege the audiences had. The willingness to go to see theater, especially at an established theater mere minutes away from Harvard Square, implies certain types of cultural capital possessed by the audience members. Cultural capital is a Bourdieusian term that describes the habits and knowledge possessed by an individual that is influenced by privilege and impacts one’s status.\textsuperscript{181} The placement of the performance near Harvard Square and at a theater that operates in conjunction with Harvard University also impacts the perceived power dynamics in place.

\textsuperscript{181} Cultural capital is discussed in more detail in Chapter One and Chapter Four.
Harvard University is a leading institution and symbolically holds power, granting a higher status to those who are affiliated with the institution. Although Diane Paulus’ work at the A.R.T. has been to create a more populist theater that invites audience members without as much cultural capital to enjoy the work, the position that the A.R.T. holds impacts the audience members who are most likely to go to performances.

Herein lies the most difficult issue when talking about *Witness Uganda* as a musical for social change. The audience is generally a population of privileged people, and the type of change intended through the performance is not completely directed towards its audience. Is the show about trying to get privileged people to improve the way they go about service work? Or is it about changing the lives of Ugandans? Is it both? From my perspective, the problem is that as an audience member, the goal seems to be two-fold: to make a statement about Americans attempting to do social justice work in Africa and also to create change in Uganda through giving access to education for the students portrayed in the show. I think that both issues are fair to tackle, although, because the show is written by two men from the United States, it does make more sense to discuss how privileged people, such as those watching the show, are able to make change in an effective and non-problematic way. However, because of the unclear intent through the performance, it is difficult to accept *Witness Uganda* as musical theater for social change.

This chapter focuses on those who are making change through theater and the tactics they use to make change that could be applied to *Witness Uganda* in order to make it less problematic and more successful in its goals, or at least the goals that I perceive. I look at two performances that employ Theatre of the Oppressed tactics, *The Crystal Quilt* (1987) and *Many Happy Retirements* (1990). I compare *Witness Uganda* to three musicals that I consider to be theater for social change, *Steel/City* (1976), *Get a Job!* (1991), and *Special* (1992). It is important to
remember that, in social justice work, the community that you are working with is the main
focus. Some tactics succeed for some communities, but others fail. While there is no single
approach to create these community-based works, this chapter offers some examples that seem
relevant and have appropriate tactics for *Witness Uganda*, either for when it began as a
documentary musical or in terms of the production at the A.R.T.

**Theatre of the Oppressed in Action**

As discussed in Chapter One, Theatre of the Oppressed is a form of theater for social
changed based on the methods of Augusto Boal. Today, there are many artists who are using
Theatre of the Oppressed across the world. I describe Age Exchange Theatre Trust in London
and Suzanne Lacy’s Minnesota Whisper Project in the United States. Both of these projects used
ideas based on Theatre of the Oppressed in order to tell the stories of older adults. Although
often the word oppressed is used to describe people who are being actively persecuted or abused,
oppression can take shape in many different ways. Ageism is prejudice and discrimination based
on a person’s age. Both of these projects are in response to ageism in different settings, the
workplace and the community, and work to give voice to the oppressed, the older people who are
experiencing ageism. These examples are similar in some aspects but utilize the Theatre of the
Oppressed model for their own individual communities. By looking at some of the tactics used
by these projects, it will be easier to understand how Theatre of the Oppressed works in a context
similar to *Witness Uganda*’s. By comparing these tactics to the way *Witness Uganda* was created
and developed, I can point out how the show could have shifted its course and become more
successful in terms of creating social change with the possible help of the Theatre of the
Oppressed system.
Age Exchange uses aspects of Theatre of the Oppressed in order to tell and preserve the stories of older people (ages 62 to 75). Although professional actors perform in each production, the older people collaborate with the writers, directors, musicians, and actors in order to tell the story that they, the older people, are interested in telling. In her article about Age Exchange, founder Pam Schweitzer describes the process and performance of *Many Happy Retirements* (1990), which focuses on the experience of retiring. The process of making the script was based on writings and interviews of the older people involved in the project, telling their own stories to be made into a larger work. Throughout the process, the collaborative group of artists and older people decided that the performance should be done in front of pre-retirement courses, for although the classes taught about the financial side of retiring, they rarely brought up the psychological and physical changes faced upon retirement.

In performance, Schweitzer used a version of Boal’s forum theater in order to allow those who are heading towards retirement to get a chance to participate in common situations and hopefully come away with more understanding than before. By performing at pre-retirement courses, *Many Happy Retirements* allowed soon-to-be retirees (and oftentimes their spouses) to be part of the action. Sometimes, between scenes, Schweitzer would ask the audience to predict what would happen next. Other times, they were asked to be part of the performance and give advice to the characters about what to do in a given situation. In one scene, Schweitzer invited audience members to stop the action and take the place of an actor to replay the scene with a different outcome. In these performances, Schweitzer writes about veering away from

---

183 Ibid., 68.
184 Ibid., 71.
forum theater as a strict form and rather used it as a way to get audience members actively participating with the work.\(^{185}\) She allowed audience members to interact with the performance in different ways, so as to make them more comfortable and ultimately thinking more critically about their impending retirement.

Similarly to *Witness Uganda*, *Many Happy Retirements* uses actors to stand in for members of the community who are being oppressed. In *Many Happy Retirements*, the oppressed community is older people while in *Witness Uganda*, it is the children in Uganda who do not have access to an education they desperately desire. The difference is that *Many Happy Retirements* used the representation of the oppressed community in a Boalian way, using forum theater as a method to create social change. One of my difficulties in positioning *Witness Uganda* as theater for social change is the disconnect between the oppressed community the show represents and the performances. Forum theater would have been one approach to allow the show to create social change with the community of children in Uganda in a different way that would be more in line with the system and goals of theater for social change.

Suzanne Lacy’s Minnesota Whisper Project used ideas from Boal’s body of work in different ways. This project focused on women ages 65 to 90, in order to “celebrate the diversity and wisdom of this much-ignored social group.”\(^{186}\) The project culminated in a performance called *The Crystal Quilt* (1987). Through the project, thirty-five women were trained in leadership programming; they then gathered groups of women (equaling to about four hundred) that met regularly to talk, get to know each other, write a newsletter, and discuss issues surrounding older women. Recordings of the meetings were used to create a sound collage for

\(^{185}\) Ibid., 77.

the performance. Lacy gathered support for the project from institutions such as the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute for Public Affairs, the Minnesota Board on Aging, and the Minneapolis College of Art and Design. These institutions were helpful in working towards not only empowering the subjects through how they feel about themselves but “in how they are seen within a social framework.”

*The Crystal Quilt* was performed on Mother’s Day 1987 in the Crystal Court of the “most prestigious office building in Minneapolis.” The women wore all black clothes and filed into the courtyard, which had been set up with many little square tables with four seats at each table. The women sat down and unfolded the tablecloth (which was black when folded but bright yellow and red when opened). The women had conversations with their tablemates for forty-five minutes as the sound score of their voices echoed through the courtyard. The audience stood watching from the balcony. Every so often, a musical cue would come in, at which point the women would change the position of their hands in unison before continuing their conversations. At the end of the performance, the audience was invited to come down to the tables and continue the conversation with the women. Lacy considers the audience participation an important part of the performance, using Boal’s notion of breaking the wall between performer and spectator in order to create better communication in the community.

Similarly to *Many Happy Retirements*, the way in which Lacy created *The Crystal Quilt* acts as an example of the way *Witness Uganda* could have employed Boalian ideas in order to create change through performance. If influencing the Ugandan children through performance

---

187 Ibid.
188 Ibid., 116.
189 Ibid.
190 Ibid.
191 Ibid.
was the ultimate goal, as opposed to making money for the Uganda Project, *Witness Uganda* could have created a performance with the children involved with the Uganda Project instead. Obviously making a piece paralleling *The Crystal Quilt* would have drastically changed the style and location of the piece; I use this example to understand the different possibilities surrounding Theatre of the Oppressed. The system could have been used in conjunction with Gould and Matthews’ desire to create a piece of theater based on Matthews’ experiences in Uganda and starting the Uganda Project.

Although there was no evidence of using forum theater as a technique, Boalian concepts can be identified in the production of *Witness Uganda* at the A.R.T. There was always an ‘Act III,’ which comprised of a talkback responding to the piece.\(^{192}\) The moderators changed depending on the performance, allowing for the discourse to remain focused on the different issues brought up in the play. The audiences were encouraged to continue to engage with the show after the curtain call, something that does not normally happen in a musical. In this way, *Witness Uganda* utilized ideas found in Boal’s work. In *Witness Uganda*, there was a clear divide between the playing space and the audience, and there was certainly no time for audience members to interrupt the action of the musical such as in forum theater. However, *Witness Uganda* did make an effort to bring the spectator’s voice into the theater in a way that Boal encourages and that has been used in other iterations of Theatre of the Oppressed.

**Musicals for Social Change**

Although there are not many musicals that are considered theater for social change, there are some that act as wonderful examples when compared to *Witness Uganda*. *Steel/City* (1976), *Get a Job!* (1991), and *Special* (1992) are examples of musical theater that can be used to create

---

\(^{192}\) Matt Gould (co-creator of *Witness Uganda*) in conversation with the author, September 17, 2014.
social change. These shows are musicals, although the relative quality of the musical might not be at the same level as *Witness Uganda*. The shows themselves are forms of community-based theater. Each deals with a specific community, from which its cast is created, that deals with an issue that is meaningful to the cast and to the intended audience. As pieces to juxtapose against *Witness Uganda*, they are extremely effective. However, it is important to note that it is difficult to find much information on these performances. They were not created in order to have a wide audience or share a story among more than the people involved in the community. In this way, these musicals emulate *Witness Uganda* in its beginnings, when it was performed at benefits as a documentary musical. I look at these productions in order to understand how *Witness Uganda* could adjust to better create social change.

In 1992, Mark Lynd wrote an article for *The American Sociologist* on his project that created musical theater performances through Participatory Action Research (PAR). PAR is a form of social justice research, in which the act of research works to break down the power dynamic between the researcher and participants by allowing them to be co-researchers. Lynd’s idea came about from weekly meetings with a group to “sing, pray, talk about their lives, and take action in the community.”¹⁹³ The group, which called itself the Friends Support and Action Group, normally consisted of eight to fifteen people a week. Most of the people in the group were adults with physical or developmental disabilities. Together they decided that the action should focus on developmentally disabled adults and the issues surrounding their lives. They decided that the best way to create this action was to create musicals.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 100.
The group developed and performed two shows, *Get a Job!* and *Special*. In *Get a Job!* the group “dramatized the difficulties disabled people face in getting and keeping jobs.” In *Special*, the group researched the intricacies and complexities within the systems of oppression in the mental health system. Lynd’s goal, especially with the second production, was to explore questions such as, “how…the participatory theater experience [could] be made conscientizing for group members? Would engaging in the world help them develop a deeper understanding of the oppression they faced? Would this deeper understanding lead to some sort of action?” *Special* was performed in front of members of the mental health system. After the performance, audience members joined into a group discussion with the participants as the last part of the research project. While *Witness Uganda* worked to influence an oppressed community through performing with trained musical theater professionals, Lynd’s performances used the oppressed community members as performers, allowing them to gain agency by representing themselves on stage. *Witness Uganda* does work to bring Freirean critical consciousness about an idea to people who are not familiar with the topic, but it does not fully involve members of the oppressed community in the process, which is a key reason it cannot be considered theater for social change.

Another important example of a musical for social change in action is *Steel/City* (1976). *Steel/City*, written by Attilio Favorini and Gillette Elvgren, engages in social justice by “memorializing the history of the steel industry in relation to Pittsburgh and its environs” while using the words of local steelworkers and their families in order to create the script. The show

---

195 Ibid., 103.
196 Conscientization, from Chapter One, is Paulo Friere’s term, meaning critical consciousness.
197 Ibid., 111-112.
198 Favorini, Attilio and Gillette Elvgren, “I Sing of Cities: The Musical Documentary,” In *Performing Democracy: International Perspectives on Urban Community-Based Performance*
was performed at the University of Pittsburgh Theater as part of the University’s American Bicentennial celebration in March 1976 with an ensemble of student actors, including one lead actor who was himself a steelworker as well as a part-time student.\textsuperscript{199} It was performed again in the summer of 1976. In 1992, it was revived through the Three Rivers Shakespeare Festival, “to coincide with the centennial of the Homestead Steel Strike, which forms the climax of the play’s second act.”\textsuperscript{200}

Source material for the script included “excerpts from George Washington’s diary…[and] a scene using verbatim excerpts from writings of Andrew Carnegie, Herbert Spencer, and the preacher Russell Conwell.”\textsuperscript{201} It also included text from interviews of current steelworkers and their families conducted by Elvgren and Favorini. The playwrights describe the play as follows:

The first act resembled a romantic epic, chronicling the settlement of Pittsburgh and the rise of the steel industry and its ambitious genius, Andrew Carnegie. The second act felt like a tragedy, though with a strongly melodramatic cast. It staged the growing gap between the rich and the poor expressed in burgeoning conflict between the industry and the people it consumed. That brought the story up to the failed Homestead Steel Strike and the founding of the United State Steel Corporation…[The third act formed] a rough chronology of immigration, unionization, and domestic reminiscence from 1900 (where the second act ended) to the present… [including] three presentational flashback scenes to bridge the stylistic gap.\textsuperscript{202}

Both productions in 1976 were greeted with mixed reviews, although Elvgren and Favorini believe that word of mouth was the key in bringing audiences to the theater.\textsuperscript{203} Both the March

\begin{flushright}
199 Ibid., 191.
200 Ibid., 182.
201 Ibid., 190.
202 Ibid., 190.
203 Ibid., 191.
\end{flushright}
and summer runs had large audiences throughout. During the summer run, the show was brought
to the Smithsonian American Folklife Festival in Washington, D.C. The most thrilling response,
for the authors, was the reaction of the show’s “coccreators, the steelworkers and their
families.”204 It is interesting to note that the 1992 revival of the musical documentary “was not a
satisfying experience.”205 The revival did not bring in large crowds like its previous production,
due largely to the fact that ironically there was a strike that shut down the major newspapers
during the week of the show. The playwrights also believe that the show had lost an important
component when the actors had no direct association to the steelworkers; in 1976, most of the
students had family members who were steelworkers. They believed that the “changed social
conditions” were the main reason for the less satisfying experience.206

The key to all of these shows is that the social justice action and research are just as
important as the final product to the creators, who are explicit about their source materials. In the
A.R.T.’s production of Witness Uganda, the audience is told that the show is based on a true
story, but the dramatic storyline takes enough poetic license to become something different
altogether. It is also important to note that, while writing about their respective projects, Lynd
and Elvgren and Favorini do not go into large detail about the final product of the shows. It is
evident to me in reading their articles explaining the works that it was the process that was more
important than the performances themselves. In this way, I am curious to know how the
interviews were conducted in the first iterations of Witness Uganda. Although we know that
Matthews’ secretly recorded rant became part of the production, what other interviews were
used? Was the act of researching for the musical part of the social justice action that was

204 Ibid., 192.
205 Ibid., 194.
206 Ibid., 195.
created? It is evident that there are many techniques to go about creating a piece of theater while keeping social justice in mind. All of the above examples show the different approaches to making theater by, of, or for a specific community. *Witness Uganda* used many tactics that could be headed in that direction. However, because of the lack of clarity in terms of the goals for audience social change, it is impossible at this point to make a clear judgment about what change to the production, either in writing or in performance modes, would be most effective in creating the optimal social changes.
If I am correct in my analysis of *Witness Uganda*’s inability to fulfill all four criteria points, then *Witness Uganda* is not musical theater for social change.

However, I think that its ability to almost complete all the criteria indicates the fact that *Witness Uganda* was not made without good intentions and without the capabilities to become more focused on social justice in the future.
Conclusion: Where Are We Now? Where Are We Going?

“So no, we don’t have a building to show for our work, like we can’t say look at the buildings we’ve resurrected in the village. We can’t say that. Because that’s not what we’re trying to do. We’re trying to resurrect people.”

-Griffin Matthews

As a lover of musical theater and a passionate believer in advocating for social justice, I am incredibly inspired by the idea that a piece of quality musical theater could also fit into the category of theater for social change. I began writing this thesis hoping to show how Witness Uganda is an example of musical theater for social change, a combination of genres that is hard to find. However, throughout the process, it is clear that the show cannot be considered musical theater for social change by my definition. Although there are some aspects of the show that point towards theater for social change, there are not enough key elements that could make the show fit into that genre adequately. In this thesis, I have looked at the way Witness Uganda works towards social change and other productions that work towards similar goals. The show may not fit into my definition of musical theater for social change, but it has opened my eyes to the possibility of such shows in the future and what stands in the way of this hybrid genre’s growth.

As I have discussed, Witness Uganda has many aspects of its performance that are successful in terms of working towards social justice. I noticed many similarities between Witness Uganda and other musicals that are focused on social issues, such as those described in Chapter Two, Of Thee I Sing (1931), The Cradle Will Rock (1937), Hair (1967), and Rent (1996). Witness Uganda has followed an important tradition of using musical theater as a

---

platform to discuss issues facing society. I left the performance in March 2014 impressed with how Witness Uganda seemed to be different from most musicals focusing on social change. I was inspired at the end of the show because it felt different from other musicals that I had seen. It might have been because Witness Uganda is dealing with a current crisis that is still happening today as opposed to a show written fifty years ago.

When I watch an older musical dealing with social problems from that era, it can feel more distant and less urgent in its social change message. It is important to understand that watching Hair can still have an impact when discussing war and counterculture or how watching Show Boat can reference the racism that is still effecting our country. However, it is a wholly different experience to see a performance that is directly commenting on issues that the audience sees in the news. Brechtian theory looks at the way historical distancing can give the audience a more critical lens to look at the work, as opposed to reacting emotionally to the events that are recently or currently occurring. Brecht argues that, by putting the action in a different time period, it is harder for the “spectator to identify himself with them [the characters in the performance].” I agree with this idea because I did “feel” at the end of the performance, something Brecht works against in an effort to have the audience compelled to “reason” with the topics brought up in the play. It is completely understandable for Matthews and Gould to work towards an emotional response, because that could garner more feelings which could get more donations, but Brecht’s philosophy about how to create social change in performance suggests that another strategy would have been more effective for more lasting change in the audience.

209 Ibid., 37.
Another important distinction that sets apart *Witness Uganda* from other contemporary musicals that deal with social issues is that viewing the performance becomes a social action. By buying a ticket, each audience member is supporting the orphans whose education is funded through the Uganda Project. Audience members are also encouraged to donate or buy t-shirts that also benefit the children involved in the Uganda Project. One of the important differences between theater for social change and musical theater is that participation, either as a performer or as an audience member, operates as an action towards social justice. In some ways, this action means creating Freirean dialogue within oppressed groups of people about their lives and working to effect change through that capacity, such as in Augusto Boal’s work in Brazil.\(^{210}\) Other times, action is created by bringing up an issue important to a larger community and looking at it critically through devised performances, such as *Oh What a Lovely War* (1963)\(^{211}\) or *Special* (1992).\(^{212}\) These performances create clear action through the performance itself. *Witness Uganda*, through the money raised for the Uganda Project, utilizes this strategy effectively, gathering funds through the performance that influence the children benefitting from the organization.

While the act of viewing the performance does create financial change, the show also works to make a change in the audience members and how they think about helping in our society. Throughout the performance, Griffin (the character, played by Griffin Matthews) grapples with the frustrations and contradictions of aid work. He struggles not to fall into the trap of voluntourism and instead makes lasting change in the lives of several students with whom he

http://www.jstor.org/stable/27698626
has made a strong connection. Even though the material is more theatrically crafted than the events in real life, the overall goal to engage the audience with a difficult to discuss topic is a significant part of the appeal of *Witness Uganda* as a possible piece of musical theater for social change.\(^{213}\) The story encourages the audience to reconceptualize the way they understand what it means to help a group of people that they know very little about and that it can be problematic to attempt to work towards social justice in communities that are unfamiliar. By working to change the mindsets of its audience members, *Witness Uganda* encourages a transition towards social justice.

The production puts Uganda in the spotlight as a specific country with issues that should be understood by our citizens. The show creates a situation for audience members to connect emotionally to the stories that they may see in the news about Uganda. By giving the audience a way to connect with Ugandan problems, the show encourages audience members to take more action and be more engaged with issues around the world. Audiences hopefully will look for more information about Uganda and the myriad issues the show touched upon, including the AIDS epidemic, privatized education, and the anti-gay laws. This heightened interest in Ugandan issues is ideally one of the largest changes that the show creates in the audience, but it is difficult to know if it was actually successful. By focusing the show on a country that they have a great deal of knowledge about, the creators worked to increase social awareness about Uganda.

*Witness Uganda’s* Act III structure is a crucial component of what makes *Witness Uganda* different in terms of musicals that work towards social justice. Unlike most talk-backs which are focused on the performers, *Witness Uganda* brought in “experts and scholars [to]

\(^{213}\) Matt Gould (co-creator of *Witness Uganda*) in conversation with the author, September 17, 2014.
reflect on the themes of the show and discuss their own research and work.”

Speakers included Director Diane Paulus, Chief of Child Protection in the Programme Division of UNICEF Susan Bissell, Director of the Boston University’s African Studies Center and Associate Professor of Political Science Timothy Longman, and founder of the Global Village Children’s Project Anne I. Muyanga. Act III allowed for the performance to be put into a real-world context, showing audience members how the ideas that were explored in the show should continue to be discussed outside the theater. This structure encourages audience members to extend the conversation past the curtain call and challenge ideas that are seen as typical in every day life. I saw the closing performance, which focused on co-creators Gould and Matthews, so I did not find out how the discussions changed depending on the expert in attendance. Act III provides a space for dialogue about the performance and the ideas it brings up, which is a common tactic used in theater for social change, such as during Special, Mark Lynd’s musical that was discussed in Chapter Six. This structure utilizes dialogue in a Freirean sense, allowing for the audiences’ voices to be heard along with the experts’.

Without all of the social change components, Witness Uganda is a well-crafted piece of musical theater. It won a 2012 Richard Rogers Award for Musical Theater in its beginning stages for the script and the production at the A.R.T. won the 2014 Richard Rogers Production Award, given to specific productions. The production also won the 2014 Edgerton Foundation New American Plays Award. As a viewer, I could not say that there was anything in the performances that I would want to change. The acting had a broad style that is common for

---

215 Ibid.
musical theater. Diane Paulus’ directly was effective and fit her directorial style of visually stimulating sequences, clear acting choices and engaging storytelling. Her populist theater mindset created a piece of musical theater that was accessible to a wide audience, something Gould hoped to accomplish through switching to a book musical. Darrell Grand Moultrie’s choreography drew me into the action and the singing and live band conducted by Gould gave me chills. Tom Pye’s set design, with a large rising platform, screens for projections, and some smaller set pieces and details, was simple and elegant. Maruti Evans’ lighting design and Peter Nigrini’s projection design also worked well adding to the performance. In this thesis, I am interested in the way the piece creates social change more than well-crafted storytelling and virtuosic performing, although that is still important to note. As a stand-alone piece of musical theater, without looking at the other aspects of my research, I think that the script was well-shaped to tell an engaging story. Although my research does not focus on the merits of the show as it stands without the social change aspect, it is important to note that I, along with many others who saw the show, left with many positive things to say about the performance and production value.

_Witness Uganda_ was doing many things right, however there were also aspects that made it less effective and ultimately not fit into the category of musical theater for social change. The show boasted that the plot was “based on a true story,” but it was misleading in the way it created a cathartic emotional release for the audience and a clear “bad guy” as opposed to looking at how people with good intentions could ultimately be problematic. Characters like

---

217 Gould, discussion.
218 “Audience reactions to ‘Witness Uganda’ at A.R.T.,” YouTube video, 1:27, Posted by American Repertory Theater (A.R.T.), February 18, 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PYv_uELk1AU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PYv_uELk1AU). This comment is based on a video on the _Witness Uganda_ page of the A.R.T.’s website that features many interviews with patrons as they leave the theater.
Griffin and Joy mention that people with good intentions can turn out to be problematic when it comes to aid work; however, we were not given any clear characters that epitomized this notion. Joy’s monologue quoted in Chapter Four speaks of the well-intentioned but problematic voluntourist. She talks about pretending to smile and takes pictures with the volunteers but not getting to know them because she knows they will leave and never return. We do not get to view how such a character would exist in the story, beyond in Joy’s memory. Griffin and Ryan are the only two Americans volunteers we see in the story, but both are positioned as different from the average volunteer.

By portraying a clear story of struggle and success, the audience left with a lighter heart, rather than feeling as though there is still more work to be done. As the audience leaves the theater, the only option to start creating change is to donate to the Uganda Project or buy a t-shirt, so the goal for the show clearly seems to be creating a mood in which audiences will want to do those things. Bringing up difficult social problems that could actually be describing people in the audience while also getting people to want to donate is extremely hard, so I understand why leaving the audience with a cathartic experience was the choice. Brechtian theory argues that allowing the audience to have a cathartic experience can lead to inaction afterwards.  

Augusto Boal similarly writes that performances with a clear rise and fall of action allows for the audience to “follow the character empathetically” but ultimately “detach” when the tension has been resolved. Although a more difficult story to digest might have made the show less commercial, it could have created more unresolved feelings in the audience members resulting in more potential for further action.

---

219 Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, 57.
As mentioned earlier, it was significant that the act of seeing the performance i.e. paying for the tickets, was translated into money for the Uganda Project. But, the fact that the action created by the show was purely monetary only emphasizes the problematic relationship between philanthropists and recipients of money that are explored in the show. As previously mentioned, in “Bricks” Griffin talks about the fact that aid is normally only referencing to monetary aid.\(^{221}\) The connection between money and aid work is positioned as problematic in the show, and yet donating money is the main way the audience in encouraged to participate after Act III. Bostonian audiences were able to feel good about having helped a cause by watching a show and maybe getting a t-shirt. I will be honest, I have a t-shirt with the Uganda Project logo in my closet. Although the show was able to raise more money for the organization at the A.R.T. than at any fundraiser where the documentary musical version was performed, audience members may lack a full understanding of the organization.\(^{222}\) It did not matter if the audience had an understanding of the cause they were influencing. Audience members were allowed to feel good about themselves by participating in this type of passive action. The problem is that such action does not require additional engagement. The audience only perpetuates the ideas exemplified by voluntourism and the problematic structures of many aid organizations. Audience members are not able to fully engage with the students that they are helping but only with the memories of the adults who played those students on stage. This issue is not by any means new to *Witness Uganda*, but it makes a distinct contrast to productions that create action through using members of the community as performers, such as *Special* and *The Crystal Quilt*.\(^{223}\)

---


\(^{222}\) Gould, discussion.

\(^{223}\) See Chapter Five.
Most of the issues I have found when looking at *Witness Uganda* come from the fact that the show is attempting to be commercially viable, possibly at the expense of making the most amount of change in each person. In my interview with Gould, we discussed that becoming more commercial requires giving up many things and working hard to keep some of the things that are most important to you.\(^{224}\) When making the shift between a documentary musical to a book musical, Gould was thinking about whether the ideal location for the show would be in “weird downtown theaters” or if the show should be created for a more uptown aesthetic with “wide appeal.”\(^{225}\) As they created the show, he was working towards a show that could “take people on a journey they could have an experience with” as opposed to presenting the actual words of people involved in the organization.\(^{226}\) Gould is clearly trying to create change through theater, hoping that *Witness Uganda* can “illuminate some sort of truth that is going to allow us as human beings to think and act differently.”\(^{227}\) Personally, I believe that the things that were lost may have made the show closer to theater for social change. That is not to say that either of the co-creators has been purposefully working against a cause that they care deeply about. It is only that their understanding of how to create social change through theater is different than the criteria I have gathered based on the genre of theater for social change.

One of the biggest changes that I think made a large impact was switching from a documentary musical to a book musical. The documentary musical structure, based on works by Anna Deavere Smith and Tectonic Theater Project, works better to create an informed audience and outline the purpose(s) of a show than the typical book musical structure. It gives a context for the audience members and allows for them to actively engage in the discourse set up by the

\(^{224}\) Gould, discussion.  
\(^{225}\) Ibid.  
\(^{226}\) Ibid.  
\(^{227}\) Ibid.
texts quoted during the performance. Book musicals are more likely to tell the audience what to feel rather than offering a dialectic relationship between performers and audience members. This dialectic relationship between privileged and underprivileged harkens back to Freire’s tactics for social justice. *Witness Uganda* sets up a plot where we know who to root for and who to dislike, taking away the dialogue and making it more one-sided. Boal discusses how Aristotelian theater sets up a hierarchy between the performers and the audience members, creating a one-sided exchange of information, meaning from performer to audience. He expresses a need for Freirean dialogue in theater, where audiences are able to participate, challenge, and respond. While documentary plays/musicals do not have a function for allowing participation in the moment of performance, they require audience members to create their own meaning of the texts presented, giving the audience agency. Audiences lack this agency in the more typical Aristotelian structure that could be seen in *Witness Uganda*. Although Act III did try to combat the hierarchical structure created through the show by allowing audience members to speak their thoughts in the theater space, it still created a hierarchy of power. An expert sat at the front of the space, expressing his/her thoughts with an audience that still sat in their seats asking questions. A solution, albeit a spatially challenging and time consuming one, would have been to have the audience join the experts on stage to sit in a circle that attempted to erase the power dynamic between performer/spectator, like Boal’s work strives to accomplish.

The social justice potential of *Witness Uganda* was at its greatest when the show was a documentary musical. It worked towards a specific goal of raising money for the Uganda Project by passing along the stories of those connected to the organization. It was used during fundraisers that explained the organization as a whole. As a work that looked at the complexities

---

228 Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, 139.
229 Gould, discussion.
of aid work through the lens of one organization, it succeeded in raising money and opening up a
dialogue. It had a more specific focus and a more direct outcome. Through the transition into a
book musical and onto a stage that emphasized virtuosic performance as well as promoting a
message, the show lost the clear focus of creating social change. Being commercially viable and
prosperous at the A.R.T. requires being artistically impressive for an audience that is used to
seeing high caliber productions. This pressure makes it difficult for a performance to also
focus on the ideals of theater for social change, which are to create work that is of, by, and for a
group of oppressed people. The switch from documentary musical to book musical might have
been necessary to get the type of exposure that resulted in more people being shown the
possibly-diluted message and to the type of critical response that I am offering through this
thesis, but at what cost? Would the show have been more effective in creating social change by
staying a documentary musical? Because it is nearly impossible to truly measure the amount of
change created by a performance, it is hard to tell, but I believe that a more focused show would
have had a greater impact on its audience members if it had not been changed to try to reach a
wider audience.

Ultimately, theater for social change is very difficult to make while also being
commercial. Even though Witness Uganda is not musical theater for social change, I think that it
is still an important step in the right direction. Matthews and Gould were able to raise money for
their organization while also creating a meaningful show that deals with difficult issues, such as
the complexities of aid work. Just like shows including Of Thee I Sing (1931), The Cradle Will
Rock (1937), Hair (1967) and Rent (1996), Witness Uganda works to bring about a discussion of
important social issues of the time. It gave a voice to the children who are also having their lives

230 Ibid.
changed through the money made through the show. Through this process, it has become clear to me that it is difficult, if not impossible, to create theater for social change in a commercial setting. A show that is going to make money for an established theater needs to appeal to a wide audience in a way that theater for social change, by my definition, does not strive to accomplish. Allowing space for the performers and the spectators to blur the hierarchy of power is difficult when the performers are being paid and the spectators are paying. Ultimately, musical theater for social change is unlikely to succeed commercially, but using musical theater to work towards social justice through means other than codified theater for social change should continue to be explored.

In studying the way Witness Uganda could function as musical theater for social change, I have been looking at the structure of the show more than the content itself. Theater for social change has specific structural indicators, while the subject matter can have a wide range. Although Witness Uganda does not utilize the structure of theater for social change, the ideas and intentions behind the show are similar to the theater for social change productions studied in this research. It is important to keep in mind that Witness Uganda is still changing. My analysis is of the show in March 2014, but the show has undoubtedly been changed and revised as it is developed for a run on Broadway. Although I discuss the show as a static product, Gould and Matthews are still continuing its process. During the course of my research, I have increased my understanding of what would be required for a piece of musical theater to work as theater for social change. Witness Uganda, because of its commercial aims, does not fit into my mold of theater for social change. But maybe it can signal a new wave of musical theater that is working towards social change in new and exciting ways. With a critical eye on what is working in the production and always striving to make more adjustments, musical theater creators can see how
their genre can be used to increase social justice in the world. As a genre that has a history of actively thinking about and responding to the social climate of the world, musical theater is at a turning point. By following and enhancing the model set up by *Witness Uganda*, creators should continue to study theater for social change, understand how the aspects of that genre can exist in the commercial landscape of contemporary musical theater, and create social change that is engaging and ultimately increases social justice in new and important ways.
Epilogue: Breaking News

On May 7, 2015, I was heading towards a special senior dinner for Colby’s Theater and Dance Department. During my ten-minute walk to the dinner, I saw on my phone that Witness Uganda had officially announced its off-Broadway run at Second Stage Theatre and that the show’s title is now Invisible Thread. The show is going to be directed by Diane Paulus, as in the production at the A.R.T., and premiere in fall 2015. As I write my epilogue a week later, it seems fitting that the show would be changing at the very time that I am wrapping up my work on this project. The show has been changing as I write this thesis. My discussion with Matt Gould took place about eight months ago. The articles written about the production were published over a year ago. While I have come to my conclusions about how the musical should work for social change in the future, it is unclear what the future holds for the show.

I have no way of knowing how different the musical is at this moment. Gould and Matthews created a music video titled Invisible Thread. Although the video does not seem to be linked to the show’s plot, I wonder if the video is any indication of the way the musical is changing its tone. This event shows both the joy and frustration of writing about shows that are being created in real time. My research, while maybe more distant from the show that I saw in March 2014, has not lost any relevancy but has in fact become even more important. Regardless of Invisible Thread’s relationship to theater for social change, I see this process as a singular example of how musical theater is a genre that can change and adapt with the times. As I work as an artist and Invisible Thread continues to off-Broadway and beyond, musical theater will continue to change and grow. Regardless of if Invisible Thread is the show that achieves my ambition for musical theater for social change, the genre is changed and influenced by our current times and issues.
Bibliography


Gould, Matt (co-creator of *Witness Uganda*) in discussion with the author, September 17, 2014.


