

Musical theatre and film: Issues in adaptation

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Abstract. This text analyses the issue of the musical theatre-to-screen adaptation, emphasizing the specifics of theatre and musical film and outlining the differences between theatrical and screen language as a method of artistic expression. Furthermore, it analyses how the stage-screen adaptation may impact the aesthetic characteristics of the new product and how musical dramaturgy derives as a common denominator for both arts and a reason for choosing the director's means of expression.

Key words: musical theatre, film adaptation, musical dramaturgy, musical, film

The musical in a musical theatre and the musical film feature some significant differences as they belong to different kinds of arts. The specificity of theatre and cinema determines the characteristic imagery and artistic expressiveness of the dramatic action. When adapting the musical stage form into a cinematographic form, the problem arises how the musical drama action with its internally continuous logical striving for development and finale and by what means it could be reincarnated from one artistic imagery to another, so that the obtained new product retains the organics of the versatility and complexity of its interconnected components. In this context, a question arises: what is the factor that would unite the aesthetic characteristics of the two arts - theatre and cinema - and, using their specific features, would recode one artistic system into the language of the other. Once fixed on film as an image, the unified action in a musical film (if compared to a scenic performance) dramatically changes the relationship between music, choreography, and screenwriting. Moreover, cinema uses the dynamics inherent of the musical principle more actively (than musical theatre), which is manifested in singing and dance, and may affect the timing arrangement of the screen image.

The musical theatre and its film version have a common foundation: this is the *musical dramaturgy*, generally understood as a dramatic action realized in music. It determines the form, the composition and the foundation whereupon the expressive means are built of both the musical drama work (in the basic genres: opera, ballet, operetta, musical) and in its cinematographic analogue.

It is no coincidence that I have pointed out in a previous study that the term *musical dramaturgy* has different interpretations. The most common contradiction that arises in its use is related to the prioritized emphasis on individual concepts - *musical* or *dramaturgy*. That said, the category of *musical dramaturgy* contains different genre characteristics, respectively in: opera, ballet, operetta, musical. Moreover, it is also determined for purely instrumental genres: sonata, concerto, symphony, etc. On the one hand, this term acquires the essence of a cliché while on the other, it contains a number of various renderings (Odazhiev 2014a, 56).

The American musicologist Professor Damien Colas, who considers *musical dramaturgy* in the context of opera, treats the content of the term most accurately. “It is perfectly obvious that opera is a particular form of theater: a particular form, that is, of stage action. Not so obvious is how to identify the elements that generate drama in an opera: to precisely describe operatic dramaturgy” (Colas 2014, 177). A testimony to this is the everlasting debate in the context of music history. In addition, Professor Colas specifies that there are two theoretical schools: “According to one of these, the drama stems from the verbal text; according to the other, it originates in the musical elements” (Colas 2014, 177).

I will quote examples of opposing standings: the musicologist Professor Carl Dahlhaus explains that the term *musical dramaturgy* is not merely descriptive, but expresses something more than its obvious content, namely that the main constituent element of opera as drama is music (Dahlhaus 2003, 73). This line of perception, which comes from the idea of the dominant role of music in *musical drama*, can be seen as far back as in the works of Heinrich Schenker, an Austrian musicologist from the early twentieth century, who, in analysing the sonata form, wrote: “For what is the fundamental purpose of the turns and tricks of the cyclical form? To represent the destiny, the real personal fate, of a motif or of several motifs simultaneously. The sonata represents the motifs in ever changing situations in which their characters are revealed, just as human beings are represented in a drama” (Schenker 1980, 12). As we can see, Schenker finds the parameters inherent in dramatic analysis, such as *situation* or *motifs*, in the images expressed through music.

In his thesis titled *Musical Dramaturgy in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Theatre on the British Stage*, Robert Dean shares another opinion, a more widespread one: “Musical dramaturgy is a form of signification inextricably connected with the relation of narrative. Whether music is used to create a particular atmosphere, punctuate a dramatic event or indicate an emotional response, the meaning produced relies primarily on the narrative context within which it is framed. Consequently, the dramatic text is a document of primary importance in an analytical process that seeks to identify theatre music’s dramaturgical contribution within certain given circumstances” (Dean 2010, 14).

In fact, such a controversial statement implies the cardinal question: When we look at the *musical dramaturgy*, are the rules of drama followed or the rules of music? The rules of drama make use of such concepts as: conflict, exposure, set-up, development, and culmination, all relating to actions and events. According to the rules of the musical form, the equivalent concepts are: theme, musical dynamics and statics, tonic, starting point, cadence, intonation, contrast,

all of which describe musical images. Following the rules of a dramatic text and sticking to the rules of a libretto encompassing the “pure dramaturgy”, i.e., the orientation following a text rather than music, is a professional trap for most modern directors of musical theatre productions.

This is where we need to emphasize that *musical dramaturgy* encompasses all texts expressed through vocal (along with the recitatives and the laconic replica text) and the symphonic parts of a musical stage work, i.e., its overture, finale and leitmotif systems. “Music is the summarizing means, it binds all elements of a drama and hides in itself the internal motives of the protagonists. In addition, the leading part of music determines the particularities of a composition, which differs from setting up a literary drama” (Odazhiev 2014a, 78). At the same time, let us remind that it is not music that adapts to a libretto, it is quite the opposite - the script material should be limited to the degree of utmost brevity, because its territory gets occupied and expressed by music (and it is not only about transforming monologues into arias and making duets out of dialogues, it is also about the variety of parts performed by the orchestra).

We need to reiterate that *musical dramaturgy* is enriched by the methods of a symphonic development of instrumental music. One such resource used to symphonize the genre is the application of *intonation complexes*, developed consistently all along the while of the action, e.g., a *leitmotif*, a *leittheme*; what is used is the unity of a tonal perspective, the transfer of different “arches” between moments of a dramatic action expressed by music that are more distant from each other.

Of course, the more the territory of a verbal drama is “expanded” the more we drift away from a typical operatic phenomenon and the closer we get to the so-called synthetic forms, i.e., to the operetta or musical, where elements of the opera and of the verbal drama are united and where there is a relatively more frequent alternation of musical episodes and conversational scenes. A work has *musical dramaturgy* when music expresses the most important bits of an action. However, “drifting away” does not mean that the phenomenon vanishes - it keeps on having the same coherent sustainability, but is sort of “diluted”. Dramaturgy principles remain, including the principles of analysis, which in this case also have a synthetic form. The musical analysis again comes first (following the idea that hierarchically, music is the supreme art in synthesis), however it also adds some elements from the dramaturgical analysis, with a subjugated feature referring mostly to the textual segments.

Musical dramaturgy would naturally correspond with complexity and refinement of interpretation, with an orientation to the classic symphonic music and bright histrionics in the staging of the performance.

There is also another conclusion, specifically concerning the musical: it strongly resists, if considered from the perspective of dramaturgy, which is explicable by the leading presence of musical and choreographic predominance in the histrionic show. In the case of the musical film, the main intricacy in the study of the musical dramatic action is hidden in the fact that the cinematographic action originates from the intersection of several components: dramaturgical, musical, and choreographic. The cinematographic story in a musical is precisely the internal principle found by the director, which allows every ele-

ment to come to foreground and to act independently in the relevant episode. This is why a viewer may remember the expressive details of the dance, melody and song and may find it easy to retell the plot. Many researchers justify the sketchiness inherent of a musical precisely by the strengthening of the musical component. The genre “closeness” of musical to opera has been reiterated on multiple occasions by a large number of musicologists and film experts dealing with the issues of the genre. Considering the possibility of full breaking off of musical from opera and its emancipation as a specific genre, Jack Bornoff asks the question whether it is possible to shape new forms that would reconcile musical, dramatic and dance elements, unconnected with opera, while applying technical means. He gives an affirmative answer to this question by noting the sustainability of the structure-forming elements of this genre (Bornoff 1968, 19).

If, in agreement with Bornoff's opinion, it is assumed that the “original” genre prototype is opera (with “original” in this case being taken conditionally, as it is also a synthesis of music and theatre), operetta emerges as an attempt to parody the great opera form, while the musical is specific, a newer modification of operetta, in which the main structure-forming “novelty” is the presence of choreography as an equivalent expressive element. Unlike opera however, the role of music in operetta is reduced at the account of purely dramatic action. And in the musical there is a variety of degrees of dominance of *musical dramaturgy* depending on whether there is a single musical and dramatic line, as it is in *West Side Story* by Leonard Bernstein, *Porgy and Bess* by George Gershwin, *Les Misérables* by Claude-Michel Schönberg and Alain Boublil, etc., or the musical structure is expressed through a series of song episodes alternating with larger dramatic scenes: *Mamma Mia!* by Benny Andersson and Björn Ulvaeus, *The Sound of Music* by Richard Rodgers, *Mary Poppins* by Richard Sherman, etc. However, once introduced as a principle of organizing the theatrical process *musical dramaturgy* subordinates music, dramaturgy, and choreography. It determines the priority of vocalization (although the musical is characterized by purely dramatic episodes, but in this case, they are perceived as a dramatized musical structure). Someone singing on the stage himself/herself is an element of conditionality (artificiality), which predetermines (as in the opera) the way of stage expression - obviously conditional again (varying from work to work), expressed in a specific sign-and-movement system in the case of the musical - to a great extent by choreographic developments, and to a lesser extent - by rhythmic movement, etc., but always containing the conditional sign in itself. The space in which the acting singer exists (the stage environment) also bears the features of a certain degree of conventionality: it must be in harmony with the general system of conventions dictated by the specifics of the music.

The implication is that musical theatre, be it opera, ballet, operetta, or musical, carries genre-forming features that are aesthetically coherent, unchanging (so that the genre unity can be maintained as such). Thus, a special type of conditionality is formed, without which the genre would disintegrate. Therefore, its transfer to the screen requires the transformation of one type of conditionality, which is theatrical, into the language of another type of conditionality, which is cinematic.

We may talk about “musical cinema” when: 1) the temporal organization of the film is “strung” on the musical theme as the main one; 2) the semantic and metaphorical plan derives from the music; 3) if the music conveys the emotional sphere of the story revealed by the director, regardless of its content; 4) if the reactions of the spectators are “programmed” through the music (Berezovchuk 2003, 14).

Sergei Eisenstein was the author of the most accurate definition of musical cinema: “The musical film is not when an accordionist appears on the screen, at another moment a *chastushka* (akin to “limerick”, Translator’s note) is sung, and at other times the film is just conversational. We believe that a musical film is one in which the absence of music is seen as a caesura, even if it is the length of an entire roll, but which must be considered (not to mention calculated) very strictly, as a rhythmic interruption of sound. In this case, the musical continuity of the “motion” picture is not disturbed; and if the obvious music is excluded from the screen, then in no less strict musical course it continues and is led further by the “music of dialogue, and not by the babble of the lines, the plastic alternation of elements of landscapes, the trembling unfolding of the fabric of experiences of the characters, the cross-cutting rhythm inside the episodes and the rhythm of the assembling connection between the episodes” (Eisenstein 1964, 582-583).

And since it is a matter of transforming not just the stage musical into a film musical, but the musical theatre into musical cinema, and more generally the theatre into cinema, it is appropriate to consider the aesthetic or philosophical characteristics of the two arts.

In one of my previous studies, I pointed out that “the affiliation of musical theatre to dramatic theatre as a form of art, and of musical cinema to cinema, gives us a reason to address the issue of the correlation of the two arts - theatre and cinema - and, in particular, how their spatiotemporal parameters work” (Odazhiev 2014b, 75). This is important because, in effect, it is about transforming one type of art into another. Is this transformation possible?

When considering the morphological features of the art of cinema and that of the theatre, the basis of which is related to the question of spatiotemporal categories in them, quite often such concepts are used, characterizing them as *real - conditional*, in which different content is put. The opposition is reflected in the cinema theory, expressed in contradictions such as *assembling - photographic*. André Bazin holds the opinion that the only basis of cinema is its *photographic exactness*, admitting the existence of these two opposite lines presented by “those directors who put their faith in the image and those who put their faith in reality” (Bazin 2004, XV).

This opposition is also considered in Ziegfried Kracauer’s theory, which places the presence of physical reality at the centre of cinematic aesthetics: “... films may claim aesthetic fullness when created on the basis of the key properties of cinematography; i.e., films, like photography, must register and reveal physical reality” (Kracauer 1974, 64). Describing the above two tendencies as realistic and form-creative, he finds their roots as far back as in the approaches of the “strict realist Lumière” and of “Méliès who widely uses his artistic imagination.” “In full analogy with the concept of “photographic approach” in cinema,

it can be called “cinematic approach to the material...” Recognizing the right to exist to both tendencies, Kracauer points out that “in cinema, everything depends on the right ratio of realistic and formative tendency” and, of course, defending his views on the primacy of physical reality, states that “it will be correct only when the formative aspirations of the creator will obediently follow the realistic ones, without trying to suppress them” (Kracauer 1974, 64).

It can be said that this tendency is analogous in theatrical art as well, generally expressed through the sharp aesthetic opposition between the theories of K. S. Stanislavski and V. E. Meyerhold, while formally designated as *an opposition between realism and conditionality*.

It is precisely the way in which cinema and theatre as separate arts deal with their artistic time and space that is important for the analysis in order to understand the principles of aesthetic compatibility in the adaptation of a stage work in screen, and to find “points of conflict” in the process of the transformation of one art to another.

Kracauer believes that the environment (space) should be interpreted as “non-staged reality” in contrast to the other way, which he describes as “fantasies,” on which he also has a position - what the proportions of the primary depicted material (physical reality) should be, namely: “Fantasies ... can be considered completely cinematic only if they are not only depicted in the language of realistic shots, but are also conceived as phenomena conditioned in one way or another by physical reality” (Kracauer 1974, 81).

Turning to the space in the dramatic theatre, it should be noted that the stage space (due to its ontology - from Greek *theatron*, i.e., ‘a place for a spectacle, a cult place’) is an artificial, a conditional phenomenon. No matter how much the sets (for some period of time) strive for vitality, the space of the stage is always an artificial, conditional environment. Characterizing the time category in the theatre, it should be emphasized that it is related to the presence of a live actor on the stage and the process of his/her perception by the spectator “here and now”. He/she can also be interrupted by the ways in which the action is divided, but in a complete episode in which the actor exists, the real time on the stage (in which the actor lives) and the time of the spectator will always coincide. The actor, as the bearer of the time coordinate, also carries the idea of the “game” - in its understanding of a “presentation”: “Theatre is not a game, it is not a spectacle, it is not a sum of play and spectacle and it is not their synthesis”, writes J. M. Barboj. In the theatre, not only the whole, but also the functions, the goals and the very meaning of each “source element” turn out to be radically different” (Barboj 2008, 3).

Thus, the idea of “game” as a structural element of the specific theatrical content - as emphasized by M. Barboj - and as a phenomenon, which models the play space as sign-play space, comes into conflict with the actor-space ratio. Yuri Lotman considers this issue as follows: “... cinema also provides opportunities for movements, however, the movement is projected onto a two-dimensional flat surface and in a delusive space. And the attitude of the actor to space in cinema is completely different from what it is in theatre. A theatre actor is a living and wholesome personality and is clearly demarcated from the non-living environment, while on the screen, the consecutive images of an actor are only components of the overall image, as it is in painting” (Lotman 1973, 43).

Time in musical theatre is the same as in dramatic theatre - it is the real current time "here and now" (although in vocalization and choreography as a function of music, it is also the artistic time of the composer, reflected in his/her score). Nevertheless, it is perceived as a wholesome and common time, the same as the spectator's. Time in cinema, as it is known and as mentioned above, is fragmented, mediated by editing, perceived through the conditional sign system of visualization, or it is visualized time, i.e., it is subjected to the dominance of visuality as a major phenomenological feature of cinema. Thus, it becomes clear that in the transformation it is necessary to transform the linear, real current time encoded in the musical score into a conditional cinematic time, or into a new visual line.

How is transformation of the visual line performed? Space on the stage is conditional: usually, the scenographic solution of a staged musical is brilliantly developed play-wise. The sets amaze with their scale, with the ways in which they are transformed from one theatrical-playing environment to another, with their numerous impressive lighting effects, special stage tricks and magical costumes. Live orchestra, live performance of songs, live acting presence, magnificently developed choreographic numbers. "The presence effect" acts as a mesmerising force. Here, the film musical faces at least two tasks: to compensate for the live presence by other means and, above all, to find a solution on how to create the visual line so that it could be transferred to the screen and would not lose its "theatricality" and playful nature. This is particularly important not only for the purpose of "preserving the genre," but also to harmonize singing and dancing with their environment.

As the roots of the musical film are closely connected with its stage prototype, on the screen the musical must retain the feeling of the space of the stage, expressed through the conventionality of the theatrical sets and the combination in one face of the singer and the actor. However, even if the film has been created as a primary product - *Sunset Boulevard* by Billy Wilder, *Moulin Rouge!* by Baz Luhrmann, *All That Jazz* by Bob Fosse, - it is, however, guided by the principles laid down in the composer's musical score (which also includes drama, determines the degree of conditionality in the concept of the reality of the environment, the way the actor exists on the screen, etc.) and relies on "source" materials of a theatrical nature.

The problematic nature of the expression of music by visual means, and of theatre by means of cinema has been reflected in a number of theoretical studies in music and cinema science. Z. Kracauer, reflecting on the problem with the subordinate relationships of music in a film and the visual line, notes: "Listening to such a performance on the screen, we inadvertently replace the visual impressions with internal sensations caused by the flow of musical rhythms in sound drawings, i.e., there is a relocation of the emphasis, which clearly contradicts the specifics of cinema... We could get the same impressions when we are in the concert hall ... Interestingly, the very nature of cinema resists this" (Kracauer 1974, 200).

In addition to raising the question of the psychological process of perception - music is stronger as an impact and the viewer becomes more of a listener, Kracauer also touches on the "conflict" of the dynamics inherent in film lan-

guage as visual art, and external (movement) static of the musical number, such as aria, song, duet, choir, etc. "When during the performance of a concert, he writes, the camera stands still - as if it were a music lover, so absorbed in the music that he/she listens to it, holding his/her breath - the weakened intensity of life on the screen usually does not enhance our auditory reaction, but on the contrary, exposes the inconsistency of the entire interpretation of the film material; and then it seems to us that the music itself is dead" (Kracauer 1974, 201).

The camera, following the nature of the music, turns out to be static, which destroys its own nature and turns the viewer into a listener.

However, the plot that Kracauer talks about is only one part of the theatricality of musical theatre - a whole construction of theatrical attributes grows on it: stylized sets, props, costumes, lighting, all together creating an illusory, magical world. "In general, the genre of musical film, writes Kracauer, tends more to the stage fantasy. Knowing all this, it is difficult to understand why musical films can be cinematically attractive. Their conditional sets and individual song numbers are more appropriate for the stage than for the screen" (Kracauer 1974, 203).

This analysis of the aesthetic compatibility of staged musical art and cinema yields a system of "conflict points."

- Music containing dramaturgy, or else, musical dramaturgy, is what dominates musical theatre. In cinema, drama is realized by means of editing and visual language. A question comes to the foreground: how to express anything that is musical using visual means.

- The image of the environment in cinema, characterized by objectivity and naturalness, is incompatible with the ultimate conditionality (artificiality) of the environment, inherent to the genre of musical theatre.

- The singing person on the stage exists in a specific coordinate system of sign features, which are characterized by a pronounced stylization (of any kind), or by increased expressiveness. Cinema a priori presupposes naturalness in behaviour, reluctance in gestures, etc. A singing actor in a musical, in addition to vocalization, also expresses themselves through choreographic drawing (from the most inconspicuous to maximally developed in choreographic terms), which also requires its solution in the adaptation from one art to another.

- While performing on the stage, a singing person would show very high levels of emotionality (dictated by the music), which recourse to increased facial expressions. What is typical of cinema is that reactions are externally laconic (however intensive they are internally), unobtrusive or restrained.

A conclusion may be derived that while adapting a theatre show to the screen, an obvious necessary of brightness of image and visual effects emerges, together with spectacular shots, varied play with the possibilities of editing rhythm and its combination with music and acting, contrasting pictorial plans or angles, i.e., all the cinematic tools that can lead to a state of shock, provoke and surprise the viewer.

The musical film genre transforms the ratio of imagery and music. While imagery coordinate starts to gain power and strength, visualization of orchestra episodes, i.e., overtures and interludes, are also added. This is how musical static is filled with dynamic cinematic imagery, while revealing the internal resources

of the musical score. Typically, the unity of the visual line and its concordance with music is supported by the introduction of some special visual leitmotifs helping amplify the imagery coordinate.

Another key element would be the translation to the screen of the “play” understood as a principle in the staged musical. The visual solution of a musical in a theatrical environment would recourse to the play of individual elements from the set, which, together with lighting and the special effects, would appeal to viewers’ fantasy. While the play nature of a spectacle would be in harmony with the “artificiality” of a phenomenon such as a singing person, in the case of a musical we would also need to add a dancing person. And this is where its power (space’s) is - in its nature of a play. In cinema, such conditionality and conciseness may not be replaced only by a bounty of imagery (as it is cinema and cinema has a multitude of visual resources). The very space within the shot needs to be made up so as to preserve its play nature (meaning it should contain a bit of conditionality). And here comes the common misconception - once it is cinema, you need to unfold the maximum pictorial background, but how will it relate to the singing, i.e., with the play element and with the dances - a convention that requires an equally talented visual solution that would avoid overcrowding - and this question is critical. The film environment must be just as provocative as the setting in the theatre, just as “playing” and affecting the imagination of a viewer (but by other means) as it is in the theatre.

Pictorial angles, camera movements, etc., they cannot exhaust cinematic language. No matter how dynamic and cluttered its cinematic language is, if it does not have a conditional “solution” (for example, the moon that suddenly smiles against the real night sky in the *Moulin Rouge!*), it will only be a pictorial background that would contradict of the game philosophy of the musical-action score. The way would be to incorporate theatrical elements to create double perspective and hence overlapping theatre onto cinema. Such theatricality might be yielded in many ways such as straight playing with space and its details, though a dialogue with the camera much the way this is done with a viewer, etc.

Summarizing, I will quote the great Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan, who says: “The content of a movie is a novel or a play or an opera” (quoted after Hutcheon 2006, 3). What may be added to this is: ...or a musical. The screen adaptation of a musical is no novelty in cinema, however it is quite often to come across the new hybrid where a musical film would be stripped off the features of its stage original. This polystylistic and multiple plot phenomenon with unclear and elusive definition owed to the continuous phenomenon of artistic mimesis was born on the stage and there it feels “comfortable.” Its adaptation is a risky creative process with many unknowns. This is why it is important to derive several basic principles in terms of the approach in the process of adaptation of musical theatre to the screen: 1) during the transformation of the musical stage form into a film, a series of conflicting points arise, and it is crucial that these be resolved in proper aesthetic conformity in order to preserve the new product of the versatility and complexity of its interconnected components; 2) the *musical dramaturgy* is the general foundation of the theatrical musical and its film version and can serve as a starting point in the artistic director’s staging decision; 3) the transformation of the stage conditionality into

a screen conditionality requires from the film director a coherent system of means of expression, corresponding to the peculiarities of the musical score and forming a new semantic and metaphorical (or symbolic) conception.

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