

Branding Bechdel's *Fun Home*: Activism and the Advertising of a "Lesbian Suicide Musical"

by Maureen McDonnell

The Journal of American Drama and Theatre

Volume 31, Number 2 (Winter 2019)

ISSN 2376-4236

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Alison Bechdel offered a complicated and compelling memoir in her graphic novel *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006), adapted by Lisa Kron and Jeanine Tesori into the Broadway musical *Fun Home* (2015). Both works presented an adult Bechdel reflecting on her father's troubled life as a closeted gay man and his possible death by suicide. As Bechdel herself noted, "it's not like a happy story, it's not something that you would celebrate or be proud of."^[1] Bechdel's coining of "tragicomic" as her book's genre highlights its fraught narrative and its visual format indebted to "comics" rather than to comedy. Bechdel's bleak overview of her father's life and death served as a backdrop for a production that posited truthfulness as life-affirming and as a means of survival. *Fun Home*'s marketers, however, imagined that being forthright about the production's contents and its masculine lesbian protagonist would threaten the show's entertainment and economic potential. It was noted before the show opened that "the promotional text for the show downplays the queer aspects," a restriction that was by design.^[2] According to Tom Greenwald, *Fun Home*'s chief marketing strategist and the production's strategy officer, the main advertising objective was to "make sure that it's never ever associated specifically with the 'plot or subject matter.'" Instead, the marketing team decided to frame the musical as a relatable story of a family "like yours."^[3] The marketers assumed that would-be playgoers would be uninterested in this tragic hero/ine if her sexuality were known. Ticket buyers who perceived the lesbian protagonist's sexuality as a barrier to their "recognition of [her] humanity" risked not experiencing the subsequent ethical empathy that tragedy might elicit.^[4] In the marketers' efforts to circumvent the lesbophobia and taboos against suicide they imagined would-be playgoers might hold, they became complicit in such prejudices. As the production was met with commercial and critical success, a "both/and" marketing approach surfaced: that the production was both timeless *and* timely, with the production newly presented as a vehicle for affirming emerging legal gains for LGBTQ+ rights generally, and marriage equality in particular. This rising sensibility that lesbian characters and culture were commodifiable might justify future shifts from Broadway's systematic exclusion of lesbian characters, even if for mercenary, capitalistic reasons. The creative team voiced their support of lesbians and their rights throughout the run, a departure from the endorsed narrative of Greenwald's company. The producers began to echo the creative artists' advocacy after two nearly simultaneous events: the production's anniversary of winning five Tony Awards and the Orlando mass shooting as the deadliest incident of violence against LGBTQ+ people in US history. The producers' commentary swerved in June 2016 when they began championing both the production *and* the communities it represented, albeit a year after the show's critical reception was secure. These evolving campaigns suggest the vulnerability of productions that feature female actors playing sexual minorities and gender non-conforming characters. By featuring a butch lesbian as its lead, *Fun Home* was culturally revolutionary, providing a cultural—and commercial—landmark for mainstream musical theater.

The musical featured three different actors performing the characters of Alison Bechdel: “small” Alison at 8, “medium” Alison at 19, and Alison at 43. The categorizations emphasized the characters’ visual differences (e.g. “small” versus “youngest”), in keeping with what may be a cartoonist’s default parameters. The adult Bechdel character served as a narrator, drawing at an artist’s table as she observed and commented on the memories enacted by her younger counterparts. An early line of Alison’s summarizes the plot: “Caption: Dad and I both grew up in the same small Pennsylvania town. And he was gay, and I was gay, and he killed himself, and I became a lesbian cartoonist” (“Welcome to Our House on Maple Avenue”).^[5] This expository line frontloaded the musical’s conclusion within the first eleven minutes of performance.^[6]

The musical’s disclosure was strikingly more efficient than that of the marketing team. It was only after *Fun Home* opened that Tom Greenwald revealed that the “marketing team jokingly referred to [the play] as a ‘lesbian suicide musical.’”^[7] This inaccurate characterization invited misdirection of a familiar type.^[8] Despite a long cultural history that presents lesbians as necessarily isolated, doomed, and suicidal, this production challenged those tropes by presenting a lesbian protagonist who survives the dramatic action.^[9] This theatrical and biographical outcome indicates the political dimensions of *Fun Home*’s tragedy, as its *lack* of an abject lesbian underscores that the tragic lesbian figure is conjured and constructed rather than fixed and innate. The team’s “joke” not only reinforced a stereotypical narrative about lesbian death, but also suggested that they saw the narrative arc of Bruce Bechdel (Alison Bechdel’s father) upstaging that of his daughter (it is Bruce who dies by suicide in the musical). Despite the decentering and misrepresentation of Alison Bechdel’s character, playgoers would have been able to easily learn that this dramatic protagonist’s real-life counterpart helped shape this creative narrative rather than becoming a victim of it. The marketing team’s omission of Alison Bechdel from the promotional campaign was perhaps motivated by their desire to make the show more broadly appealing to investors by erasing her sexuality and survival.

Such concerns about financial solvency reflected the financial structure of 21st century Broadway productions, a time in which corporate interests frequently override artistic innovation.^[10] Theater scholar Steven Adler writes of this trend, noting that production often depended upon partnerships, sometimes with the powerful real estate moguls who owned the theaters, [which] provided the best means of mounting shows. Corporations, with extensive financial and marketing resources, recognized fertile territory in the hardscrabble of midtown Manhattan and joined the fray. A Broadway presence might bolster the corporate brand, as with Disney.^[11]

Disney-authorized productions are sometimes called “McMusicals” (a term that emphasizes the production’s consumability) or “technomusicals,” which theater director and scholar John Bush Jones describes as “a phenomenon . . . driven by visual spectacle” and “engender[ing] little or no thinking at all.”^[12] Such spectacles are often mined from popular movies and books whose familiarity allows productions to draw upon already established fan bases. American musical scholar Elizabeth Wollman points out that these moments of

synergy allow[] a company to sell itself along with any product it hawks. The Broadway version of *Beauty and the Beast*, for example, can be mentioned in Disney films and television shows, or advertised on Disney-owned radio stations. Disney musicals can also serve as advertisements for one another.^[13]

Wollman notes that “shows with corporate backing can now be hyped internationally in myriad ways long before a theatrical property begins its run,” a factor that contributes to Broadway functioning as a “global crossroads, populated by transnational corporations catering to tourists.”^[14] Given that only one in five Broadway shows recoup their initial investment, derivative productions and revivals included, the marketing campaign reflects both the financial precariousness of theater generally and reticence about *Fun Home*’s cultural content specifically.

Investor caution is especially warranted with musicals, particularly if they are new. Commercial houses rarely undertake such efforts. Instead, creative teams who wish to develop those works mostly rely on non-profit theaters whose educational and artistic missions state their willingness to sustain financial loss. Such collaborations can be contentious, as revealed by Ars Nova’s decision to file suit for breach of contract over their billing after their production *Natasha, Pierre & the Great Comet of 1812* transferred to Broadway in 2016, or result in a commercial juggernaut like *Hamilton*.^[15] *Fun Home*’s move from the Public Theater to Broadway was underwritten by three primary producers, Kristen Caskey, Barbara Whitman, and Mike Isaacson. In an interview published shortly after their investment was recouped, the producers provided a thumbnail sketch of the skepticism people held towards the production:

“They said we were insane to do this,” said Mike Isaacson.

“Really? You’re bringing that to Broadway?” recalled Barbara Whitman.

“I think crazy was the word we heard most,” said Kristin Caskey.^[16]

Admittedly, the producers’ diction may have been only unintentionally ableist. But such comments problematically echoed the disproven historical notion that people who were sexual minorities were mentally ill, another suggestion of discomfort about *Fun Home*’s treatment of sexuality from people outside of the creative team.^[17] Such stereotypical conflation of “insanity” and lesbianism re-produced the specter of the tragic lesbian the producers attempted to discard.

Frank disclosures aren’t the only way lesbianism surfaces within Broadway musicals. Musical theater scholar Stacy Wolf’s generative work invites playgoers to deploy “a spectatorial/auditorial ‘lesbian’ position that is not essentialist but rather performative: any willing, willful spectator may embody such a position of lesbian spectatorship” which can “lesbianize” the text.^[18] *Fun Home* extends itself beyond presenting a “hypothetical lesbian heroine” because its protagonist’s sexuality is not solely dependent on viewers decoding subtext or deploying Wolf’s rhetorical techniques but is additionally affirmed by depicting the character Alison’s queer childhood and subsequent coming out.^[19] Moreover, *Fun Home* offers an androcentric lead, a break from Broadway’s dominant tradition. *Fun Home*’s departure from highlighting feminine lesbians risks what literature scholar Ann M. Ciasullo cautions against: dehumanizing the butch lesbian who is imagined as “too dangerous, too loaded a figure to be represented.”^[20] However, one of the chief innovations of *Fun Home* was its butch lesbian lead. Instead of functioning as a surrogate or scapegoat, the theatrical Alisons’ desires “lead the way to a different future” rather than “fasten[ing]” lesbians “to the image of the past.”^[21] This theatrical breakthrough appears nowhere in the advertising campaign. In their attempts to de-lesbianize the production, the marketers buried both the lede and the lead.

There have been other musicals that prominently include identifiable lesbian characters, although that misrepresentation is often uneven at best and sometimes presents lesbian characters whose sole function seems to be as “the object of the show’s most unsavory jokes.”^[22] Lisa Kron, the lyricist and book writer for *Fun Home*, revealed her response to what she saw as a trend: “there was a moment where someone would say the word *lesbian* as a non sequitur because it was funny. I’d be so on board, and then I’d be slapped in the face by it. It was just like, *This character’s a joke. This is not a person.*”^[23] Within the production, actor Beth Malone navigated this pitfall when delivering adult Alison’s line that someone she saw briefly as a child was “an old-school butch.” Malone explained her delivery of this line and her efforts to recuperate that term as follows:

When I say the word “butch,” I say it with the color of, like I’m saying the word supermodel. Because from my lens, the word butch is the most beautiful adjective I can come up with. “Oh my God, she was an old-school *butch!*” Like satisfying words coming out of your mouth. Still, it gets titters because the word “butch” is a punch line. For every other show that has ever existed, “butch” and “dyke” have been a punch line for the end of a gay man’s joke. So now we are taking that word, like the word queer, we’re owning it and saying, butch is a beautiful thing.^[24]

In Malone’s account, her artistic and activist sensibilities converged in playing this role. Such moments are bolstered because *Fun Home* featured a number of queer characters who are not solely defined by their orientation or gender identity, and whose presence is important for the plot.^[25] Although these features were present in other productions, the non-existent track record for butch-centered musicals indicates an asymmetrical Broadway history characterized by sexism and lesbophobia.

If we compare *Fun Home* with another contemporary musical with an LGBTQ+ lead character, *Kinky Boots* is an apt choice. Based on a 2005 film inspired by true events, *Kinky Boots* took thirty weeks to recoup its \$13.5 million investment, roughly the same timeline as *Fun Home* (which had lower ticket prices).^[26] *Kinky Boots* had a fuller theatrical tradition than *Fun Home* to draw upon: male actors inherit a variety of gendered performance traditions, theatrical practices that are increasingly familiar to and co-opted by straight playgoers.^[27] Gay male leads and gender non-conforming characters played by male actors are not new features of musicals. (Consider this partial history: *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, *Rent*, *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, *La Cage Aux Folles*, *Falsettos*, *A Chorus Line*, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, *Avenue Q*, *Priscilla Queen of the Desert*, *Spring Awakening*, and *Cabaret*.) Stacy Wolf usefully points out a key difference between this theatrical tradition and the one women inherit, noting that “the visibility of white gay men’s alliance with musicals stems in part from capital (cultural and real) and the general visibility of a relatively identifiable affluent, urban, white, gay male culture.”^[28] This disparity in capital was indicated in material ways by *Fun Home*’s relatively small cast of nine, orchestra of seven, and slim advertising budget, all of which kept production costs low. *Kinky Boots*’ cast was more than three times the size of *Fun Home*’s, and had an orchestra of thirteen musicians. The diverging cultural capital of gay men and lesbians also surfaced in the showcasing of the titular “kinky boots” in that production’s poster campaign, and the cloaking of Bechdel’s experience within that of *Fun Home*, whose posters evoked the colors of the 1970s in color values too deep to invoke a rainbow flag.^[29] The advertisements for *Kinky Boots* flaunted sexual and gender transgressiveness whereas *Fun Home*’s marketers closeted their characters.

Fun Home’s marketing team was not alone in minimizing its connection with underrepresented groups

outside of Broadway's cultural mainstream. For instance, *Hamilton*'s producers deliberately distanced *Hamilton* from the hip hop music and culture that influenced Lin-Manuel Miranda's show, a redirection that included a name change of the show itself from *Hamilton Mixtape* despite his earlier hit *In the Heights*.^[30] (Bechdel's book title, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, was also abridged.) Such concerns about a production's broad appeal surface in *Fun Home*'s production history, as seen in one critic's question: "Is America ready for a musical about a middle-aged, butch lesbian?"^[31] This hesitancy was echoed by the creative team and by Bechdel, who drily noted that "Lesbians are inherently uncommodifiable. . . . It's a gift."^[32] Bechdel, in her suggestion that being imagined as uncommodifiable offers lesbians a way to resist being dehumanized, echoes the precise concern of *Fun Home*'s marketers. In other words, Bechdel doesn't realize how right the marketers imagined her to be: she hits a nerve along with her punchline. Lisa Kron discussed this concern after the musical won the 2015 Tony Award:

We were constantly having to rewrite the assumed narrative, which was that this was not commercially viable. Because it's a serious piece of work. You know, it's not a pure entertainment, even though it is very entertaining. Because it was written by women, because it not only focuses on women characters but lesbian characters and more than that has a butch lesbian protagonist.^[33]

Kron clearly states her diagnosis of people's reticence about the show's viability: misogyny and lesbophobia, particularly towards masculine lesbians. Within that interview, Kron revealed the persistence of that narrative, even *after* the show was hitting crucial markers of success:

Even when we were succeeding, even when it had had a successful run at the Public and we were selling tickets on Broadway, still the question was being asked "do you think this will work on Broadway?"

These financial concerns lingered, despite the production's relatively quick financial solvency. The investors of *Fun Home* recouped their investment of \$5.25 million dollars within eight months.^[34] The tour also returned its investment within eight months, benchmarks that belie the supposed need to commercially closet *Fun Home*.^[35]

The marketing of *Fun Home* reveals a two-pronged approach. The first tactic universalized the musical. The subsequent tactic encouraged playgoers to see the production as politically engaged. In one article, readers are told that:

The subject matter, obviously, is a complication in a Broadway market dominated by lighter material. The show's producers, Kristin Caskey, Mike Isaacson and Barbara Whitman, who raised \$5.2 million [sic] to finance the Broadway transfer, are emphasizing the father-daughter relationship and journey of self-discovery, rather than the sexuality, the suicide or the fact that Alison's father ran a funeral home ("Fun Home" was the Bechdel children's nickname for the business).^[36]

Occasionally members of the creative reinforced the producers' tenet that *Fun Home* is about a generic family whose story resulted in a "father-daughter heartbreaker."^[37] Judy Kuhn, who played Alison's mother, Helen, appeared in a promo saying that "[e]verybody can relate to [the play] because everybody has a family."^[38] Elsewhere, the investor Kristin Caskey suggested that the musical offers an opportunity for "seeing your parents through grown-up eyes."^[39] Caskey volunteered that

this is how I saw the show: It was about a child and her relationship with a parent, and as she became an adult, how she came to peace with how she saw that parent. . . . I think a broad audience can relate to that, and will give the show a chance to be commercial.^[40]

Caskey's comments removed gender and sexuality as factors within the theatrical work, suggesting their irrelevance for audiences. This sidestepping so overgeneralized the musical's protagonist and her narrative arc that it nearly misrepresents the show. By the production's end, the producing team detoured from its initial, sanitizing premise of the musical's universal family to advance a counternarrative: that the show served as a cultural milestone. These antithetical approaches—that the production was both ahistorical and historically prescient—occurred concurrently during the Broadway run.

As *Fun Home* prepared to move to Broadway from the Public Theater the notoriety of Bechdel's book became a promotional tool, although not an automatically synergistic or positive one.^[41] In February 2014, the College of Charleston and the University of South Carolina Upstate announced that *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* would be part of their optional summer reading programs. Politicians responded by voting to defund those public colleges. Rep. Garry Smith, R-Greenville, justified his vote by explaining that the book "goes beyond the pale of academic debate. It graphically shows lesbian acts."^[42] (Readers who pick up Bechdel's book expecting pornography might be disappointed to find relatively few anatomical moments, aside from her drawing of a male corpse in her father's embalming studio.) Alison Bechdel and the production team went to South Carolina in April 2014 so that the cast could perform part of the musical as the six-month censorship debate was swirling.^[43] This unanticipated pre-Broadway debut "tour" marked a pivot: the creative team began to directly comment on and interact with the censorship debate even as *Fun Home*'s marketing products featured no references likely to cause controversy.

The production's responsiveness escalated in the upcoming months: the cast put *Fun Home* in dialogue with real-time national debates about marriage equality. The play opened a few days before the US Supreme Court began hearing oral arguments about the *Obergefell v. Hodges* case. Beth Malone commented on this timing in an interview given before the court decision:

Right now, the Supreme Court is arguing for our rights as human beings, and I'm going home to my wife tonight who I married in a court of law in New York City. This is a time in our lives. This is quite a time. This is quite a season.^[44]

Fun Home's actors commented on that case in front of larger audiences as well. As he delivered his Tony speech for playing Bruce, Michael Cerveris spoke of his "hope" that the Supreme Court would support LGBTQ+ citizens' right to marriage.^[45] Eighteen days later when the court confirmed marriage equality, the evening's performance included a new prop: a rainbow flag brought on to stage after the bows. Beth

Malone put the flag around her and did a victory lap around the stage, before saying “What an amazing time to be an American. We owe this night to the people who came before us.”^[46] In other interviews, Malone specified the activist and artistic pasts to which she felt indebted:

The only reason *Fun Home* itself can be a mainstream Broadway show is because of the fringe work of my sisters that came before me, like the Five Lesbian Brothers, doing this downtown theatre that was so edgy and it was happening in the margins. The margins had to exist for a really long time before it incrementally crept toward the center.^[47]

After the Supreme Court passed this civil rights case in June 2015, *Fun Home* began to be included in publications marketed towards LGBTQ+ readers. One such instance was the article within *Out* magazine that exclusively featured the actors who identified as lesbian or gay in the Broadway production (Beth Malone, Roberta Colindrez, and Joel Perez) alongside Bechdel and Kron.^[48] In another produced segment, Malone appears with her wife in a video that features her *Fun Home* pre-performance commute.^[49] These curated moments provided evidence for Malone’s sense that lesbian rights are moving towards “the center” of public sympathy and support. The marketing of *Fun Home* as proof of American exceptionalism to seventeen ambassadors from the United Nations in March 2016 also hinted at a newfound security for LGBTQ+ people.^[50]

Three months later, however, *Fun Home* responded to an intensely harmful event that targeted LGBTQ+ people. The crimes committed at Pulse (a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida) resulted in the deaths of forty-nine victims and the wounding of fifty-eight other people. This event sparked a number of responses from Broadway workers, including at the Tony Awards which were held on the day of the attacks (12 June 2016) as scheduled. Although individual Broadway actors participated in an Orlando tribute, *Fun Home* was the only production to travel to Florida to be physically present with the victims, survivors, and their families.^[51]

Beth Malone and Michael Cerveris each wrote publicly about this pilgrimage in tones consonant with the LGBTQ+ advocacy they articulated before the production’s run.^[52] The producers’ willingness to highlight the LGBTQ+ themes of the production was newly evident:

Mike Isaacson: “For our company, there is no choice but to respond with what we have, what we know, and the belief that it leads to something.”

Barbara Whitman: “I think we all had that same reaction: What can we do? This is something we can actually do.”

Kristin Caskey: “It was one of those perfect moments where everyone aligned and did so quite quickly, understanding that many of the ideas and themes within ‘Fun Home’ would be a perfect gift and a way for the community to come together in advocacy for LGBT rights.”^[53]

Their unified perspective diverged from Tom Greenwald’s earlier recommendation to “never ever associat[e] [the play] with . . . the subject matter.” At this moment, some fourteen months after the show opened on Broadway, the producers unambiguously voiced their objection to the homophobic and

lesbophobic crimes.^[54] Particularly striking is Caskey's transition in framing *Fun Home*: the show is no longer about "a child and her relationship with a parent," but a "gift . . . for the community to come together in advocacy for LGBT rights," with her suggestion that the artistic production and political advocacy were linked.

The trio continued this pattern of speaking to LGBTQ+ people when in Orlando, writing in a joint statement that "as the first musical with a lesbian protagonist, we so often hear from audience members at 'Fun Home' that it was the first time they saw themselves represented on a Broadway stage. We all feel so helpless, but hopefully this will allow us to give back to the LGBT community in this tiny way."^[55] Here, the protagonist's identity was presented as a pioneering choice, rather than a detail that needed to be hidden. Moreover, the producers acknowledged their debt *to* the LGBT community rather than distancing the show *from* that community. Such a development from reticence and repression to an overt championing of LGBTQ+ individuals' rights was remarkable and challenged the historical pattern of excluding lesbian characters from Broadway stages.

These actions that openly acknowledge and affirm the production's debt to LGBTQ+ artists speak to the gains that the production enabled. Ceveris and Bechdel offer ways to see the historical context of the run. Michael Ceveris says:

We've played through an extraordinary moment in our country's history and the most progressive and heartening ways and the most retroactive and terrifying ways. We played through the Supreme Court's decision, we played through the naming of the first national monument to gay and lesbian rights, and we played through a massacre that was horrific enough in itself and in its aftermath, when some of the hatred and reactionary comments that were made were just as horrifying. If there was ever a play that arrived on Broadway in the moment it was most needed, I think this would be it.^[56]

Ceveris encapsulated his perspective of the show as a necessary one. Bechdel's comments featured her characteristic ambivalence:

it's a funny moment. It's a very funny moment for LGBT culture and civil rights right now. I feel like the play and the success of the play is very much tied into what's happening in the culture.^[57]

Like Bechdel in her emphasis of the production's connection with the contemporary moment, *Fun Home*'s composer Jeanine Tesori spoke of production's role in advancing agendas outside the theater:

And so I think that this has met our time, it's a musical of our time. It makes me think . . . it's available, what else can it do? What are the next stages? Where are we, what can we express [in] that conversation, the global conversation, the national conversation?^[58]

The answers to Tesori's questions are forthcoming: it remains to be seen what artistic and commercial risks might be undertaken to create a more diverse, inclusive theatrical tradition for women actors to

inhabit. Despite the censorship that characterized *Fun Home*'s early promotion, the producers ultimately reckoned with a literal tragedy that befell LGBTQ+ people. This transition suggests a recognition that tragedies can be spurred by settings, such as a homophobic society, rather than by LGBTQ+ people's existence. *Fun Home* ultimately offered a way forward for a more varied performance history and for productive interplay between onstage representation and offstage politics. *Fun Home*'s temporal context offers a useful demarcation of the interplay between civic and theatrical tragedies, and the creative ways that theater can elicit empathy.

Maureen McDonnell is Director of Women's and Gender Studies and Professor of English at Eastern Connecticut State University. Her research interests include gender studies, early modern drama (including Shakespeare), and American Sign Language in performance.

[1] StuckinVermont, "Alison Bechdel's Fun Home on Broadway," 11:49, *YouTube*, 22 April 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=A9vD7Nc0L3k (accessed 1 May 2017).

[2] Sarah Mirk, "Alison Bechdel's 'Fun Home' Will Now be a New York Musical," *Bitch Media*, 11 October 2013, www.bitchmedia.org/post/alison-bechdels-fun-home-will-now-be-a-new-york-musical (accessed 17 January 2017).

[3] Kalle Oskari Matilla, "Selling Queerness: The Curious Case of *Fun Home*," *The Atlantic*, 25 April 2016, www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/04/branding-queerness-the-curious-case-of-fun-home/479532/ (accessed 21 August 2016).

[4] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 334.

[5] This line was taken from a "Stuck in Vermont" interview with Bechdel in 2008. Bechdel's comment appears around 4:50 minutes into the clip. The varied sources for the musical suggest the creative team's early openness to Bechdel's contributions beyond the published pages of her visual memoir. StuckinVermont, "Alison Bechdel's Fun Home on Broadway."

[6] According to Robert Petkoff, the actor playing Alison's father during the tour, the content of the show remained a surprise to some playgoers: "There are people in the audience who are like, 'What?! I saw kids dancing on the poster—this doesn't seem to be that story!'" Lori McCue, "The star and designer of 'Fun Home' on how their show still surprises audiences," *The Washington Post*, 27 April 2017, www.washingtonpost.com/express/wp/2017/04/27/the-star-and-designer-of-fun-home-on-how-their-show-still-surprises-audiences/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.80af729129a9 (accessed 20 July 2017).

[7] Matilla, "Selling Queerness."

[8] Heather K. Love charts this genealogy in “Spectacular Failure: The Figure of the Lesbian in ‘Mulholland Drive,’” *New Literary History* 35, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 120–22.

[9] The phrase “Bury your gays” serves as a shorthand for this narrative in popular media. GLAAD (formerly the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) provides data on the occurrence and type of LGBTQ+ representations on film and TV. See their Studio Responsibility Index for film data (www.glaad.org/sri/2018), and the “Where We Are On TV” reports (www.glaad.org/tags/where-we-are-tv).

[10] Steven Adler, “Box Office,” *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*, eds. Raymond Knapp, Mitchell Morris, and Stacy Wolf (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 356.

[11] *Ibid.*, 352.

[12] Quoted in Mark N. Grant, “The Age of McMusicals,” *The Rise and Fall of the Broadway Musical* (Lebanon, NH: Northeastern University Press, 2004), 304–15. Jones’s primary examples of the category “technomusical” are Disney productions and those affiliated with Andrew Lloyd Webber.

[13] Elizabeth Wollman, *The Theater Will Rock: A History of the Rock Musical, from Hair to Hedwig* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 145.

[14] *Ibid.*, 145, 144.

[15] Michael Sokolove profiles *Hamilton*’s producer Jeffrey Seller in “The C.E.O. of ‘Hamilton’ Inc.,” *The New York Times*, 5 April 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/04/10/magazine/the-ceo-of-hamilton-inc.html (accessed 10 May 2018). For an overview of the *Great Comet* attribute dispute and resolution see the following: Michael Paulson, “Three Words Lead to a Battle Over ‘Great Comet’ on Broadway,” *The New York Times*, 19 October 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/10/20/theater/three-words-lead-to-a-battle-over-great-comet-on-broadway.html (accessed 17 May 2018); Michael Gioia, “*Great Comet* Billing Dispute Prompts Lawsuit,” *Playbill*, 28 October 2016, www.playbill.com/article/ars-nova-sues-great-comet-producers-and-explains-why-were-taking-a-stand (accessed 17 May 2018); Michael Paulson, “Dispute at ‘Natasha, Pierre & the Great Comet of 1812’ Leads to a Lawsuit,” *New York Times*, 30 October 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/10/29/theater/dispute-at-natasha-pierre-the-great-comet-of-1812-leads-to-lawsuit.html (accessed 17 May 2018); Jeremy Girard, “Peace Now: ‘Natasha, Pierre’ Production and Non-Profit Group Agree to Secret Deal,” *Deadline*, 2 November 2016, www.deadline.com/2016/11/broadway-lawsuit-natasha-pierre-josh-groban-1201845138/ (accessed 17 May 2018).

[16] Michael Paulson, “‘Fun Home’ Recoups on Broadway,” *The New York Times*, 13 December 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/12/14/theater/fun-home-recoups-on-broadway.html (accessed 3 June 2016). Caskey repeated the characterization of the show as “crazy” in her conversation with Whitman preserved at Story Corps. “Fun Home producers Barbara Whitman and Kristen Caskey,” *Story Corps*, 1 April 2016, www.archive.storycorps.org/interviews/fun-home-co-producers-barbara-whitman-and-kristin-caskey/ (accessed 14 June 2018).

After the Tony Awards, Isaacson repeated this diction: “Everybody had been telling us we were crazy,

even stupid” (Paulson, “Winning”). As the production went on tour within the US, Isaacson described the “whole endeavor [as] a crazy leap of faith” (Moffit, “Taking on ‘tough stuff’”). Michael Paulson, “‘Fun Home’ Finds That Winning a Tony is the Best Way to Market a Musical,” *The New York Times*, 9 June 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/06/09/theater/theaterspecial/fun-home-finds-that-winning-a-tony-is-the-best-way-to-market-a-musical.html (accessed 15 June 2015). Kelly Moffit, “Taking on ‘tough stuff’ with beauty, talent, humor: St. Louis-produced ‘Fun Home’ opens at The Fox,” *St. Louis Public Radio*, 17 November 2016, www.news.stlpublicradio.org/post/taking-tough-stuff-beauty-talent-humor-st-louis-produced-fun-home-opens-fox (accessed 21 August 2018).

[17] The American Psychiatric Association included homosexuality in the second and third editions of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. The classification of homosexuality as a mental disorder was omitted in their 1987 volume. Neel Burton, “When Homosexuality Stopped Being a Mental Disorder,” *Psychology Today*, 18 September 2015, www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hide-and-seek/201509/when-homosexuality-stopped-being-mental-disorder (accessed 20 August 2018).

[18] Stacy Wolf, “‘Never Gonna Be a Man/Catch Me if You Can/I Won’t Grow Up’: A Lesbian Account of Mary Martin as Peter Pan,” *Theatre Journal* 49, no. 4 (1997): 494. She uses “lesbianize” as a verb in *A Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 26. This claim about audience reception is also a starting point for Wolf’s book-length projects, including *Changed for Good*, in which Wolf argues that *Wicked* musically and visually codes Elphaba and Glinda as the show’s central couple. *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[19] Chris Straayer’s phrase describes viewers’ willful interpretations of texts that do not secure the character’s sexuality or heroism. “The Hypothetical Lesbian Heroine in Narrative Feature Film,” in *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian and Queer Essays on Popular Culture*, eds. Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 44–69.

[20] Ann M. Ciasullo, “Making Her (In)Visible: Cultural Representations of Lesbianism and the Lesbian Body in the 1990s,” *Feminist Studies* 27, no. 3 (2001): 605.

[21] Love, “Spectacular Failure,” 129. In the footnote that follows this sentence, Love references Elizabeth Freeman’s “Packing History, Count(er)ing Generations,” *New Literary History* 31 (2000): 727–44.

[22] Ben Brantley, “Candy Worship in the Temple of the Prom Queen,” *The New York Times*, 20 April 2007, www.nytimes.com/2007/04/30/theater/reviews/30blon.html (accessed 9 June 2016). In *Stagestruck*, playwright Sarah Schulman offers a productive overview of lesbian theatrical context and the ways that lesbian characters are considered more commodifiable when presented from non-lesbian playwrights, with *Rent* as a key example. *Stagestruck: Theater, AIDS, and the Marketing of Gay America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998).

[23] Mirk, “Alison Bechdel’s ‘Fun Home.’”

[24] Adam Hetrick, “For Beth Malone, ‘Butch is a Beautiful Thing’—What This *Fun Home* Star Learned Playing Lesbian,” *Playbill*, 29 June 2015, www.playbill.com/news/article/for-beth-malone-butch-is-a-

beautiful-thing-what-this-fun-home-star-learned-playing-lesbian-351968 (accessed 1 July 2015).

[25] These are key features of “The Vito Russo Test.” See “The Vito Russo Test,” GLAAD, www.glaad.org/sri/2018/vitorusso (accessed 14 August 2018).

[26] Andrew Gans, “Tony-Winning Musical *Kinky Boots* Recoups Initial Investment,” *Playbill*, 3 October 2013, www.playbill.com/article/tony-winning-musical-kinky-boots-recoups-initial-investment-com-210206 (accessed 19 June 2017). According to Brent Lang, the recuperation happened in large part because of the high costs of *Kinky Boots* tickets. “*Kinky Boots* Recoups \$13.5 Investment,” *The Wrap*, 3 October 2013, www.thewrap.com/kinky-boots-recoups-13-5m-investment/ (accessed 19 June 2017). For additional context, *Rent* recouped in fifteen weeks, *Avenue Q* took forty weeks, and *Matilda* took some nineteen months to recoup its \$16 million capitalization (Adler, “Box Office,” 352). *Fun Home*’s cost of \$5.25 million in 2015 was less than that of *Spring Awakening* in 2007, which cost \$6 million. *Spring Awakening*’s production team was concerned that their box office might suffer from their production’s content: like *Fun Home*, that musical includes suicide, adult language, homoeroticism, and teenage sexuality. For *Matilda* box office details, see David Cox, “Broadway Musical ‘Matilda’ Turns a Profit,” *Variety*, 5 December 2014, www.variety.com/2014/legit/news/matilda-recoups-broadway-musical-1201372084/. For all other box office details, see Adler, “Box Office,” 352.

[27] Michael Ceveris, incidentally, “set the record for playing the most performances as the East German rock ‘n’ roll singer Hedwig in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*.” For information on Ceveris’s record, see Carey Purcell, “Michael Ceveris on the Closing of *Fun Home*: ‘It Arrived on Broadway in the Moment it Was Most Needed,’” *Out*, 22 August 2016, www.out.com/theater-dance/2016/8/22/michael-cerveris-closing-fun-home-it-arrived-broadway-moment-it-was-most (accessed 12 February 2017).

[28] Stacy Wolf, “The Queer Pleasures of Mary Martin and Broadway: *The Sound of Music* as a Lesbian Musical,” *Modern Drama* 39, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 52.

[29] Other details specific to Bechdel’s experience were stripped from the campaign. Whereas the cover for Bechdel’s book referenced the family’s funeral home, including a Mass card reappropriated as her book title, the musical’s poster omitted that background and that prop.

[30] See Sokolove, “The C.E.O. of ‘Hamilton’, Inc.,” where Jeffrey Seller characterized the name change as a result of “gentle but persistent prodding before Miranda finally agreed.” Patricia Herrera writes about the ways in which *Hamilton* “proclaims an inclusive narrative of American identity that obscures the histories of racism that are at the base of so much of the American experience,” as well as the promotional distance from the show’s “acoustic environment shaped by Afro-Caribbean and Afro-American musical, oral, visual, and dance forms and practices.” Patricia Herrera, “Reckoning with America’s Racial Past, Present, and Future in *Hamilton*,” in *Historians on Hamilton: How a Blockbuster Musical is Restaging America’s Past*, eds. Renee C. Romano and Claire Bond Potter (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018), 262, 260.

[31] June Thomas, “*Fun Home* Won Five Tonys. How Did a Graphic Memoir Become a Musical?” *Slate*, 8 June 2015, www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2013/10/08/fun_home_is_america_ready_for_a_musical_about_a_butch_lesbian.html (accessed 21 April 2017).

[32] Rae Binstock, “Why Lesbian Spaces Will Always Be in Danger of Closing, and Why Some Will Always Survive,” *Slate*, 20 December 2016, www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2016/12/20/why_do_lesbian_spaces_have_such_a_hard_time_staying_in_business.html (accessed 21 April 2017).

[33] “Alison Bechdel’s ‘Fun Home’: The Coming-Out Memoir That Became a Hit Broadway Musical,” *Democracy Now!*, 30 July 2015, www.democracynow.org/2015/7/30/alison_bechdels_fun_home_the_coming (accessed 14 May 2017).

[34] Paulson, “‘Fun Home’ Recoups.”

[35] Andrew Gans, “National Tour of *Fun Home* Recoups Investment,” *Playbill*, 17 May 2017, www.playbill.com/article/national-tour-of-fun-home-recoups-investment (accessed 19 June 2017).

[36] Paulson, “‘Fun Home’ Recoups.”

[37] Patrick Healey, “Moving Your Show to Broadway? Not So Fast,” *The New York Times*, 8 May 2014, www.nytimes.com/2014/05/11/theater/theaterspecial/moving-your-show-to-broadway-not-so-fast.html (accessed 2 May 2017).

[38] “Life with Father! Learn the True Tale Behind the New Broadway Musical *Fun Home*,” *Broadway.com*, 23 March 2015, www.broadway.com/buzz/180076/life-with-father-learn-the-true-tale-behind-the-new-broadway-musical-fun-home/ (accessed 13 March 2017).

[39] Paulson, “Tonys.” Kristen Caskey was played off by the orchestra in the midst of her acceptance speech. Lisa Kron’s acceptance speech was not televised, but can be found here: Jerry Portwood, “*Fun Home* was the big musical winner at the awards,” *Out*, 8 June 2016, www.out.com/popnography/2015/6/08/watch-lisa-kron-gives-moving-tonys-acceptance-speech (accessed 9 June 2016).

[40] Healy, “Moving.”

[41] The Public Theater’s Public Lab held a run of *Fun Home* in 2012 in their Newman theater, and a subsequent off-Broadway run at the Public Theater that began in September 2014. Manuel Betancourt, “From the Public to Broadway: *Fun Home*’s Growing Pains,” *HowlRound*, 22 October 2015, www.howlround.com/from-the-public-to-broadway-fun-home-s-growing-pains (accessed 27 August 2018).

[42] Betsy Gomez provides commentary on this provision, which “mandates that students be allowed to avoid encountering educational material they find ‘objectionable based on a sincerely held religious, moral, or cultural belief.’” Betsy Gomez, “This Compromise Is Not Acceptable: CBLDF Joins Coalition Condemning South Carolina Budget Provision,” *Comic Book Legal Defense Fund*, 13 June 2014,

www.cbldf.org/2014/06/this-compromise-is-not-acceptable-cbldf-joins-coalition-questioning-south-carolina-budget-provision/ (accessed 22 May 2017).

[43] *Democracy Now!*, “Alison Bechdel’s ‘Fun Home.’”

[44] Hetrick, “Butch is a Beautiful Thing.”

[45] Michael Ceveris gave the speech on 8 June 2015. Michael Musto, “Lesbian Musical Crushes Gershwin Show, and Other Tony Awards Revelations,” *Out*, 8 June 2015, www.out.com/michael-musto/2015/6/08/lesbian-musical-fun-home-crushes-gershwin-show-tony-awards-revelations (accessed 10 June 2015).

[46] These moments have been preserved by the production team, and can be easily accessed on their webpage. The *Playbill Video* site shows Kron commenting that the play is “at the cusp of an evolving opening moment.” Playbill Video, “Lisa Kron, Michael Cerveris, Judy Kuhn and Emily Skeggs Have Fun Talking “Fun Home” at BroadwayCon!,” 7:51, *YouTube*, 3 February 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=LdltIKzwLUk (accessed 13 March 2016).

[47] Hetrick, “Butch is a Beautiful Thing.”

[48] “Out100: The *Fun Home* Family,” *Out*, 9 November 2015, www.out.com/out100-2015/2015/11/09/out100-fun-home-family (accessed 17 May 2016). The shoot includes a stylist, an approach reminiscent of some of *Rent*’s promotion techniques which included clothing lines at Manhattan’s Bloomingdales and fashion spreads featuring the cast. See Michael Riedel, “Available at Bloomies: The ‘Rent’ Rags Can Be Yours—For a Price,” *New York Daily News*, 30 April 1996, 35.

[49] Theatre Mania, “A Day with Fun Home Star Beth Malone,” 6:35, *YouTube*, 30 September 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=5hQw_uwzJCc (accessed 3 June 2016).

[50] As Matilla notes, US Ambassador Samantha Powers took her colleagues to this event in May 2016, see “Selling Queerness.”

[51] Carmen Triola, “‘Fun Home’ Is Going to Orlando to Perform a Benefit Concert for Pulse Shooting Victims,” *FlavorWire*, 6 July 2016, www.flavorwire.com/583516/fun-home-is-going-to-orlando-to-perform-a-benefit-concert-for-pulse-shooting-victims (accessed 22 July 2016).

[52] For additional reports of this trip, see the following: “Broadway’s ‘Fun Home’ Cast Sets Benefit Performance for Orlando Victims,” *Hollywood Reporter*, 5 July 2016, www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/broadways-fun-home-cast-sets-908612 (accessed 11 April 2018); Michael Ceveris, “Taking ‘Fun Home’ to Orlando for a Catharsis Onstage and Off,” *The New York Times*, 6 August 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/08/06/theater/taking-fun-home-to-orlando-for-a-catharsis-onstage-and-off.html (accessed 11 April 2018); Hal Boedecker, “Pulse benefit: Broadway’s ‘Fun Home’ plays Orlando,” *Orlando Sentinel*, 5 July 2016, www.orlandosentinel.com/entertainment/tv/tv-guy/os-pulse-benefit-broadway-s-fun-home-plays-orlando-20160705-story.html (accessed 11 April 2018).

[53] Mark Kennedy, “Broadway’s ‘Fun Home’ cast sets benefit for Orlando victims,” *AP News*, 5 July 2016, www.apnews.com/c90a05bc88204ae4950c0ada08bf48e8 (accessed 22 July 2016).

[54] After their advocacy, Isaacson was awarded an Equality Award from the St. Louis chapter of the Human Rights Campaign, and Caskey was appointed the executive vice president of Ambassador Theater

Group's North American operations. See Judith Newmark, "'Fun Home' reaps more honors for its producers," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 20 November 2015, www.stltoday.com/entertainment/arts-and-theater/culture-club/fun-home-reaps-more-honors-for-its-producers/article_492d110f-3d24-574a-8517-a4dcd372b5f5.html (accessed 6 June 2018); Gordon Cox, "Broadway Producer Kristen Caskey Joins Ambassador Theater Group," *Variety*, 29 November 2016, www.variety.com/2016/legit/news/kristin-caskey-ambassador-theater-group-north-america-1201928759/ (accessed 6 June 2018).

[55] Matthew J. Palm, "'Fun Home': Cast is here for you," *Orlando Sentinel*, 20 July 2016, www.orlando-sentinel.com/entertainment/arts-and-theater/os-fun-home-orlando-benefit-20160713-story.html#nt=inbody-1%20Ceveris%20%E2%80%93%20idea%20in%20middle%20of%20show,%20producers%E2%80%99%20response (accessed 22 July 2016).

[56] Purcell, "On the Closing of *Fun Home*."

[57] *Democracy Now!*, "Alison Bechdel's 'Fun Home.'"

[58] *Ibid.*



"Branding Bechdel's *Fun Home*: Activism and the Advertising of a 'Lesbian Suicide Musical'" by Maureen McDonnell

ISSN 2376-4236

The Journal of American Drama and Theatre

Volume 31, Number 2 (Winter 2019)

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jadt@gc.cuny.edu

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The Graduate Center CUNY Graduate Center
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