

## "Ya Got Trouble, My Friend, Right Here": Romanticizing Grifters in American Musical Theatre

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Grifters. Flim-flammers. Matchstick men. Confidence men.<sup>[1]</sup> These are only a few of the many exotic and perhaps amusing-sounding names for those who spin the truth and perpetrate frauds on unsuspecting victims. There's a certain charm to the concept of the con artist, as hinted at in the term "artist," suggesting that there is an art of the con—at least in fiction, or in the abstract. As evidenced by classic films like *The Sting* (1973), *Ocean's Eleven* (1960, 2001), and *Catch Me If You Can* (2002), the character of the grifter is often depicted as charming, sympathetic, fun, or glamorous. Perhaps that is part of the reason we wound up with a con man in the White House. Many Americans consistently root for the con man even in the real world. President Donald J. Trump's very admission of being a confidence man is what leads his supporters towards this trope, since this is precisely what he has done, repeatedly. In the *Access Hollywood* tape where he admitted to sexual assault, he said "when you're a star, they'll let you get away with anything." It's the "get away with it" that I'm focusing on here—by deploying the trope of the con man, Trump doesn't even have to pretend he's honest. And he knows it: "I could stand in the middle of 5th Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn't lose voters," he said on the campaign trail. And this is nothing new for him: he's been a shark for decades. He ends his (ghostwritten) book, *Trump: The Art of the Deal* (his name is indeed part of the title) by proudly describing how he obtained his private plane for a price that was less than a third of what it was actually worth. Then he goes on to promise that soon he will stop negotiating and scamming: "I've spent the first twenty years of my working life building, accumulating...the biggest challenge I see over the next twenty years is to figure out some creative ways to give back some of what I've gotten."<sup>[2]</sup> For a true grifter like Trump, the promised reformation is always in the future, or imaginary; all that's real is the egotism of the scam.

Chuck Klosterman, the American pop culture essayist, writes about the viciousness of con artists in the chapter "Villains Who are Not Villains" in his book *I Wear the Black Hat*. Klosterman describes the American pop mythologizing of con artists as "people who—in theory—are bad citizens and social pariahs," but also "charismatic." He notes that the American con story usually involves a character who "has complex feelings about taking money from strangers," who is "never as immoral as the person he works with," and whose "marks" (those the con artist dupes) bear a great deal of the blame because "you can't con an honest man." But Klosterman also acknowledges that this is a false picture: those who have encountered real con artists know that they can destroy lives—the romanticized vision "is not something that's true; it's only something we believe."<sup>[3]</sup>

The con artist is especially prominent in American cultural studies. This makes sense, since the grifter is simply the fraudulent extreme of the salesman, and, as evidenced from both literary and historical figures, the salesman and the "American Dream" he hawks live at the heart of the imagination of the American capitalist marketplace. In his autobiography, Benjamin Franklin articulates a rhetoric of bootstrapping virtue, in which hard work, honesty, and righteousness can promise any American a comfortable life. In

his showy *The Art of Money Getting*, P. T. Barnum positions integrity and commercial success as almost interchangeable, arguing for the monetary worth of everything from circumspect communication to charitable giving. In works such as these, we see the American Dream sold—as the art of selling. As Scott A. Sandage argues in *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America*, in the nineteenth century, this ideology came to be cemented as an American cultural principle: a human being's worth (and especially a man's masculine virtue) could be tied to their financial success: those who fail to make money suffer from some moral deficiency, and those who don't strive for riches in the first place are even worse.<sup>[4]</sup> Under this perverse logic, Charlie Brown and Willy Loman are not the victims of their own faith in an American Dream that simply isn't attainable to everyone, but are sad sacks who deserve to be ridiculed. And in such a rubric, Mark Twain's *The Duke and The King*, the con men from *Huckleberry Finn* who pose as heirs to claim inheritances from deceased persons they don't know and who eventually sell Jim back into slavery, are not villainous entertainers, but somehow come to deserve the money that they swindle from the gullible.

Recently, *The New Yorker's* Jia Tolentino posited con artistry as the core aesthetic of American identity; “scamming seems to have become the dominant logic of American life,” she wrote in 2018, later expanding her argument in her book *Trick Mirror* to claim that grifting is “the story of a generation” and that millennials have “been raised from adolescence to . . . adulthood on a relentless demonstration that scamming pays.”<sup>[5]</sup> Indeed, such romanticizing of the figure of the grifter is as prevalent in the American musical theatre as it is in American cinema, politics, literature, and the sort of pop culture about which Klosterman and Tolentino write. At the same time, the figure of the con artist has not been adequately studied within the field of musical theatre studies, despite the fact that numerous studies of this genre argue that musicals are key to the development of American national identity—and to the personal identities of both mainstream and marginalized Americans.<sup>[6]</sup> As David Savran has argued, the Broadway musical is itself a particularly American form precisely because of its “cultural instability” born from its melding of a variety of genres and both “popular and elite cultures,” its innovations and revisions that constitute reflection “upon the history of popular entertainments in the United States, from minstrelsy to hip-hop,” and its deployment of both conservative cultural nostalgia and progressive utopianism.<sup>[7]</sup> This article thus contributes to parallel discussions of what it means to “be an American” by drawing a connection between American cultural studies and studies in American musical theatre.

There are numerous examples of con artists in American musicals. Even *The Duke and The King* have appeared on Broadway, in *Big River* (1985), Roger Miller and William Hauptmann's musical adaptation of *Huckleberry Finn*. Mark Bramble, Michael Stewart, and Cy Coleman brought *Barnum* (1980) to Broadway, allowing the great impresario himself to take advantage of the suckers born every minute. Cons are central plot points in some of the most significant works of musical theatre history: Gaylord Ravenal in *Show Boat* (1927) and Sky Masterson in *Guys and Dolls* (1950) are both gamblers who win the affection of a trusting woman through trickery, as does the titular character in Rodgers and Hart's *Pal Joey* (1940). Rodgers and Hammerstein deploy the less-than-honest salesman as comic relief through figures such as Ali Hakim in *Oklahoma!* (1943) and Luther Billis in *South Pacific* (1949). A monograph-length study tracking the full development of the trope of grifters in musical theatre would certainly be possible, looking at these figures and others. To name only a few: Bialystock and Bloom in *The Producers* (2001), Oscar Diggs (the Wizard) in *Wicked* (2003), Elders Price and Cunningham in *The Book of Mormon* (2011), the murderous Monty in *A Gentleman's Guide to Love & Murder* (2012), and the main characters in *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* (2004).

Considering all of these examples from the so-called “golden age” of mid-twentieth century American musical theatre to the present, it is reasonable to interrogate what it is about American culture, and what it is about musical theatre, that makes these characters so prevalent. Examining the ways these characters are celebrated in song on stage allows us more effectively to understand the ways American culture venerates con artists, despite the actual harm they cause. In this article, I argue that musical con artists embody an extreme lionization of American individualism, becoming emblematic of the ways in which our culture wants to understand, forgive, or even idolize those who take advantage of others, precisely because grifters maintain their status as empathetic subjects, even—or perhaps especially—as they turn people and communities into objectified marks. The charm of the con artist is the charm of the individual. Part of the project of being a confidence man is the ability to maintain control of the narrative about oneself, constantly redefining and transforming the self as an individual in opposition to broader, undifferentiated groups of people who will be conned. As Lin-Manuel Miranda articulates in the final song of *Hamilton* (2015), “Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story?,” which is in a sense a celebration of historiography: who constructs the record matters.<sup>[8]</sup> The con man maintains that control of the narrative about himself—transforming from a villain into a savior, from a victimizer into a sympathetic hero.

As examples of this celebration of the grifter in the American imaginary, I focus on three examples in the canon of American musical theatre—from the 1950s golden age of the form to today: Harold Hill in *The Music Man* (1957), Starbuck in *110 in the Shade* (1963), and the title character in *Dear Evan Hansen* (2015). The con artist Harold Hill is the hero of Meredith Willson’s golden age musical *The Music Man*—which beat *West Side Story* for the Tony Award for Best Musical in 1958. Bill Starbuck, who sells pipe dreams of water in N. Richard Nash, Harvey Schmidt, and Tom Jones’s musical *110 in the Shade* (based on Nash’s play *The Rainmaker*, from 1954), is ultimately depicted not as a predator but as a primal spirit of romantic—albeit not practical—passion. I utilize these first two shows because they place con artistry front-and-center in their plots: the grift isn’t secondary, at the service of a romantic narrative, or as a comic subplot. Furthermore, both *The Music Man* and *110 in the Shade* are paragons of the mid-twentieth century book musical form, what some critics including Mark N. Grant, Raymond Knapp, John Kenrick, Larry Stempel, and others have labeled the golden age of musical theatre, before conceptual innovations in the form that began in the late twentieth century.<sup>[9]</sup> And in *Dear Evan Hansen*, the title character, a high school student who reaps immense social profit by spreading a lie, is never portrayed as a victimizer but instead as a sympathetic figure whose misdeeds must ultimately be forgiven and forgotten. *Dear Evan Hansen* is a crucial example because as an extremely recent Broadway hit, with numerous Tonys and an immense popular following, the show demonstrates that the trope remains currently in full force.

Focusing on these three specific examples also allows me to examine three different types of grifters. Harold Hill is essentially a rip-off artist. Like Max Bialystock from *The Producers*, this type of con artist plans to provide a product that is no good or unusable. Hill is actually selling instruments and uniforms and a real musical is indeed created within *The Producers*, but the rip-off artist knows—and even hopes—that the community to which he sells this dud will get nothing out of it.

Starbuck represents the second type. He is the classic snake-oil salesman: part evangelist but wholly a huckster, this type draws upon the conventions of a preacher to promise a salvation (in which he does not believe) but that the community he swindles desperately needs. The title character in *Gantry* (1970), faith healer Jonas Nightingale in *Leap of Faith* (2012) and Elder Price in *The Book of Mormon* use actual

religion; but others like Masterson in *Guys and Dolls* or Freddy Benson, Lawrence Jameson, and “The Jackal” in *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* use the promise of romance. Even Ali Hakim, who pretends laudanum is a “magic potion,” is an example of this type. In some respects, the blatant hypocrisy of this type, of which Starbuck proves a particularly nefarious example, makes him even more vicious than rip-off artists like Hill.

The third type is in some ways the most morally complex. He is a precocious or developing con artist, and we watch him transition from an earnest young man into someone able and willing to con his whole world. Evan Hansen falls into this type, as do J. Pierrepont Finch from *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* (1961), Leo Bloom in *The Producers*, and Elder Cunningham in *The Book of Mormon*. In this article, I examine one of each of these types, demonstrating the ways in which musical theatre aesthetics position all of them as romantic heroes and who are ultimately redeemable.

Most commonly, scholars have approached these sorts of figures in musicals as “tricksters,” specifically outsiders working to make their way into the American mainstream. In *Transposing Broadway: Jews, Assimilation, and the Broadway Musical*, Stuart Hecht examines figures such as Finch from Frank Loesser’s *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*, “an empty cipher, a fraud,” who uses charm, luck, and a gambler’s gamesmanship to win love and financial success. In his chapter “How to Succeed,” Hecht’s point is that strategies such as Finch’s are emblematic of the way that “at some level the standard book musical became a sort of tacit blueprint of how to make it in America.”<sup>[10]</sup> And one of those ways to achieve the American dream, as Finch demonstrates, is trickery. Hecht’s investigation of the impact of American Jewish immigrants on the development of the musical form in as a symbol for the promise of the American dream builds upon Andrea Most’s study, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical*, which examines musical theatre from the first half of the twentieth century as a form of self-fashioning for American Jews. Most similarly argues for this self-fashioning as a form of clever trickery: “overt Jewish characters and themes actually *disappear* as the decades progress,” as the Jewish creators of these musicals sell Jewish-American identity as anti-Communist, white, and fully assimilated into mainstream Americana.<sup>[11]</sup>

This approach to the con artist as essentially a trickster in musical theatre studies makes sense, since scholars of con men note that the character is usually portrayed as a sort of American descendant of the *commedia dell’arte* clown Arlecchino, the crafty servant who is always out to play a prank, but is ultimately harmless. This can be seen in analyses like those of Gary Lindberg, who in *The Confidence Man in American Literature*, describes the grifter as a “trickster,” “jack-of-all-trades” and “rogue survivor [with] the ability to shift shapes and yet to keep free of the world.” The characters Lindberg describes, from Huck Finn to Jay Gatsby and Saul Bellow’s Augie March, as well as real figures like Benjamin Franklin and P. T. Barnum, are always viewed with a degree of admiration as they perpetrate hoaxes that are part “masquerade.”<sup>[12]</sup> David Maurer opens his linguistic study *The Confidence Man* with this: “The grift has a gentle touch. It takes its toll from the ripe sucker by means of the skilled hand or the sharp wit. In this, it differs from all other forms of crime...it never employs violence to separate the mark from his money.”<sup>[13]</sup> Indeed, Maurer sounds like he is describing a trickster, not exactly a criminal. However, as I argue throughout this article, there is a crucial difference between the con artist and the *commedia* trickster figure. Arlecchino, his ancestors, descendants, and parallels in other theatrical traditions do indeed perpetrate frauds. They love money, are gluttonous, and lustfully pursue sex. But in the end, they usually side with the lovers or heroes in their fight against oppressive authority figures. The authentic trickster figure is more of what Robert Ray calls an “outlaw hero,” ultimately serving the

broader community while enjoying life as much as possible, as opposed to the grifter who ultimately cares only about his own interests.[\[14\]](#)

The archetypal American con artist of the sort defined by Lindberg and Maurer was, in a sense, predicted in one of the earliest studies of our country, Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. In perhaps the most famous chapter in this text, "The Main Causes Tending to Maintain a Democratic Republic in the United States," Tocqueville articulates three main factors that allowed democracy to flourish in the United States as opposed to late-eighteenth century democratic experiments in Europe which had floundered. For Tocqueville, these three factors are the mores of the American people, the laws and constitutional structure created at the establishment of the country, and the geography itself. In describing American geography, Tocqueville presents a picture of "an almost limitless continent" made up of "empty" and "wild" spaces, which tempt Americans into embodying the spirit of individualism, ambition, and adventure that would become typical of the grifter:

[Americans] find prosperity almost everywhere . . . for them desire for well-being has become a restless, burning passion which increases with satisfaction. They broke the ties of attachment to their native soil long ago and have not formed new ones since. To start with, emigration was a necessity for them; now it is a sort of gamble, and they enjoy the sensations as much as the profit.[\[15\]](#)

In her book on con artists in nineteenth-century American fiction, Susan Kuhlmann uses strikingly similar language:

It helps to consider the con man as a one-man enterprise, inspired just as much by the beauty of his scheme as by the need for aggrandizement. Viewed in this light, he represents an individualization of manifest destiny. He takes to heart the belief that a free man may be whatever he claims he is, may have whatever his skill can win, may feel at home in any man's house. Superior wit, skill in the use of resources, a nomadic and bachelor existence, adaptability, enthusiasm, and a continual desire to better one's condition—these are the qualities associated with the type of character whom we think of as having 'opened' our country. They are also qualities of the confidence man.[\[16\]](#)

Of course, these are false stereotypes—and seductive ones indeed. Just as Tocqueville's "openness" of an American wilderness was a myth that ignored the fact that frontier-settlers had pushed out the original inhabitants of the so-called frontier, the reality of con men is a lot less glamorous: had Harold Hill completed his original plans, River City would have lost a ton of money, celebrating its American identity with a silent parade of a band of duped people.

Meredith Willson's *The Music Man* opens on the most American holiday of them all, the 4<sup>th</sup> of July (1912), with "Rock Island," in which a chorus of salesmen alert the audience to the plans of con artist Professor Harold Hill, a swindler who comes into small towns, convinces the residents that their local culture can be improved by the presence of a boys' band, sells them on instruments and uniforms by promising to serve as music teacher (even though in fact he actually can't read music, and "don't know one note from another"[\[17\]](#)), and then skips town with payment. Essentially, Hill's gimmick is selling

small-town hicks on high culture and the idea of self-improvement: using their own American idealism as the very bait that turns them into his marks.[\[18\]](#)

As with any good confidence man, Hill “never worries ’bout his line,” but makes up his scheme on the fly. In River City, Iowa (Hill’s mark during the course of the show), the grifter protagonist uses the arrival of a new pool table to rail against vice and sin, arguing that the pool table spells “Trouble / Right here in River / City! With a capital / T and that rhymes with / P and that stands for / Pool.... Fifteen numbered / Balls is the Devil’s / Tool!”[\[19\]](#) Hill sells the idea of the band (and music itself) as a cultural antidote to the vice about to flood River City—and the people are convinced. Although the residents of River City are uncultured, Willson goes to great pains to ensure that producers of the show and his audience, however, see the townspeople as essentially good Americans. Laurie A. Finke and Susan Aronstein place *The Music Man* alongside *Anything Goes* (1934) and *Oklahoma!* as a “community building ... Golden Age musical [...that presents] Broadway’s traditional vision of America as a land where dreams, with a little luck and a lot of hard work, can come true.”[\[20\]](#) In a note to directors in his libretto, Willson writes, “THE MUSIC MAN was intended to be a Valentine and not a caricature. Please do not let the actors...mug or reach for comedy effect... [they] should be natural and sincere.... The humor of this piece depends upon its technical faithfulness to the real small-town Iowans of 1912.”[\[21\]](#) This is reinforced by the fact that in their first song, “Iowa Stubborn,” the townspeople note that while they may be hard-nosed and thrifty, “we’ll give you our shirt / And a back to go with it / If your crops should happen to die.”[\[22\]](#) These are the sort of people Hill plans to swindle.

Hill is redeemed, both for the citizens of River City and the audience, like so many con men in musical theatre, through the love and forgiveness of a woman he intended to dupe. Over the course of *The Music Man*, a romance blossoms between Hill and the town’s bookish librarian, Marian Paroo, who discovers Hill’s schemes. However, upon seeing how Hill’s feigned passion for music actually inspires her shy younger brother Winthrop and town troublemaker Tommy Djilas, Marian falls in love with Harold, who reciprocates, and at the end of the musical she comes to his defense when his scam is exposed. The band is actually created, and, although it plays badly, Harold is welcomed into the community—and Marian’s arms. Stacey Wolf describes the show’s finale, “Seventy-Six Trombones” as essentially designed to “celebrate the community.”[\[23\]](#) This is, of course, despite the fact that Hill has betrayed and bankrupted countless similar communities, and seduced women like Marian before, as we hear from traveling salesman Charlie Cowell:

Who do you think you’re protecting? That guy’s got a girl in every county in Illinois, and he’s taken it away from every one of ’em! And that’s 102 counties! Not counting the piano teachers like you he cozies up to, to keep their mouths shut![\[24\]](#)

Hill is redeemed within the world of *The Music Man*, but only because we never see those 102 earlier Marians, whose love somehow didn’t transform the con man.

If Harold Hill’s villainy (stealing money from clueless but basically good communities across the Midwest) seems heartless, compare this to Bill Starbuck’s nefarious plans in *110 in the Shade* and the play on which it was based, *The Rainmaker*, in which the con artist seeks to prey upon a community that is gullible specifically because it is desperate. The story of these works takes place in an unnamed “western state from dawn to midnight of a summer day in a time of drought”[\[25\]](#) during the Great

Depression. In the musical, the small town is called “Three Point,” but it might as well be called nowhere. The townspeople are looking for some kind of salvation. In the opening number of the musical, “Another Hot Day,” they complain that “The earth is burnin’ . / Crops is bad, / And land is dry.”<sup>[26]</sup> In his foreword to the original play, Nash describes:

When drought hits the lush grasslands of the richly fertile West, they are green no more and the dying is a palpable thing. What happens to verdure and vegetation, to cattle and livestock can be read in the coldly statistical little bulletins freely issued by the Department of Agriculture. What happens to the people of the West—beyond the calculable and terrible phenomena of sudden poverty and loss of substance—is an incalculable and febrile kind of desperation. Rain will never come again; the earth will be sere forever; and in all of heaven there is no promise of remedy.<sup>[27]</sup>

Into such a landscape comes Bill Starbuck, promising that from his very confidence—for he is indeed a confidence man—he can make it rain. He admits that he is a wholly self-made and invented man: “My method’s like my name / It’s all my very own. / You wanna hear my deal? / You only need a hundred dollars in advance, / In twenty-four hours, / You’ll have rain.”<sup>[28]</sup> In the character descriptions in both the play and musical versions, Starbuck is described as “*a big man, lithe, agile—a loud braggart, a gentle dreamer. He carries a short hickory stick—it is his weapon, his magic wand, his pride of manhood.*”<sup>[29]</sup> Starbuck’s promise is ridiculous, but the people of Three Points are vulnerable enough that they take him up on his offer.<sup>[30]</sup>

As in *The Music Man*, Starbuck—really just Bill Smith—somehow earns the love of a good woman who sees through his ruse, Lizzie Curry. And Starbuck, in return, saves Lizzie, allowing her to open up, find passion, and discover herself: “Suddenly I’m beautiful / All because of you,” she sings. In turn, Lizzie gets Starbuck to admit, “Lizzie -- I got somethin’ to tell you -- ! You were right -- I am a liar ... and a con man and a fake! I never made rain in my life! Not a single raindrop! -- nowhere! -- not anywhere at all.”<sup>[31]</sup> Yet—unlike Harold Hill—although Starbuck admits his villainy, he doesn’t change. He offers to stay with Lizzie for a few days, but not forever. He asks her to come with him, to serve as his partner, to invent her own name, “Melisande.” But ultimately, Starbuck saves Lizzie not by turning her into a grifting wanderer like himself, but by allowing her to declare her love for the local Sheriff File.<sup>[32]</sup> And then it rains. The townspeople, and the sheriff, let Starbuck go—with the hundred dollars—even despite his admission of having duped them, despite his having seduced Lizzie and physically attacked File, and despite everyone’s knowledge that he plans to replicate his scam on the next desperate town he finds.

Somehow, the grotesque abuses Harold Hill and Starbuck try to perpetrate upon unsuspecting communities are sold to audiences as alluring. At least part of the answer as to how this is accomplished comes from the form of musical theatre itself. The romantic melodies of love ballads, the comic rhymes and bouncing rhythms of patter songs, the soaring and heartfelt curtain numbers that are designed to bring audiences to tears, and to standing ovations. As Raymond Knapp points out, in *The Music Man* con artists can indeed “find their redemption through music,”<sup>[33]</sup> even if, when one reflects upon their actions, it quickly becomes apparent that these characters do not deserve our sympathy.

By comparison, the scam perpetrated by the titular character in *Dear Evan Hansen* might seem less nefarious. An anxiety-ridden high-school student who has been instructed to write letters to himself as a form of therapy, Evan writes a depressed letter to himself, acknowledging that “Dear Evan Hansen: It

turns out, this wasn't an amazing day after all." He signs the letter "Sincerely, your best and most dearest friend, Me" and confesses that "All my hope is pinned on Zoe," his crush.<sup>[34]</sup> Evan's letter is stolen by Connor Murphy, Zoe's brother, an angry and depressed bully, who then kills himself, and the letter is discovered. The Murphy family and students at the school think that this letter was written by Connor to Evan, and that the two were friends. Evan allows this misapprehension to be taken as the truth, and even begins to tell stories about his and Connor's "friendship," creating "The Connor Project" about suicide awareness—all in order to get closer to the Murphy family. Evan gains popularity in school and becomes an online celebrity for his moving tributes to his "friend" Connor. Zoe becomes his girlfriend, and her father, Larry, becomes the father that Evan, who was raised by a single mother, has never had. The Murphys offer to pay for Evan to go to college. Finally, crushed by guilt, Evan admits what he's done to the Murphy family. But they never reveal his fraud to the wider community. He loses his girlfriend and surrogate family—all of whom he attained on false premises—and, when we last see him, quasi-forgiven by Zoe in a sun-lit orchard, he tells himself "Today is going to be a good day."<sup>[35]</sup>

Indeed, at first glance there are numerous significant differences between Evan Hansen and the pair of examples I've drawn from mid-twentieth century American musicals. Both *The Music Man* and *110 in the Shade* are period pieces set decades before they were written and in provincial communities far from Broadway where they were first staged. *Dear Evan Hansen* is unmistakably present—the social media utilized throughout projections in this musical makes frequent references to the 2016 election. While Hill and Starbuck are life-long fraudsters who set out to destroy the communities with which they engage, what we see is Evan's first, and hopefully only, con—which he falls into accidentally. The archetypal grifter is out for one thing: money. Yet Evan seeks different things: a relationship with Zoe, a father-figure he has never had, as well as popularity and acknowledgment within the cliquish community of high school. And of course, most notably, Hill and Starbuck are adults, while Evan Hansen is a teenager who suffers from depression.

Nonetheless, the pattern articulated through works like *The Music Man* and *110 in the Shade* still fits: while Evan isn't out to get money, what is more valuable to a high school student than the social capital of popularity and sex with his crush? Evan is an opportunistic grifter putting his own interests above those of the community, who is somehow granted salvation in the eyes of the audience through the caring forgiveness proffered by the female lead and the affective power of soaring melodies. The audience, like the Murphy family, is asked to forgive Evan for his psychological abuse because he feels really bad about what he has done. In his critique of the play for *Slate*, Jason Zinoman writes that the show's greatest success is that it "is testament to the power of skillfully crafted art to reframe, manipulate, and even obscure moral concerns."<sup>[36]</sup> *Dear Evan Hansen* is a hit with teenagers; the catchphrase Evan invents to sell his lie, "You will be found," is sold on actual marketing material for the show.

The fact that con artists like Harold Hill, Bill Starbuck, and Evan Hansen are sold as heroes within these musicals, and not villains, should be of particularly little surprise to us in the era of Trump. And so, as a coda, I return to our grifter-in-chief. Perhaps to some degree because of fictional narratives like those from these musicals, some audiences of our American political spectacle assume that this con man in the White House can and will reveal himself as only a mischievous trickster or heartfelt idealist, redeeming himself and saving all of us in the process. Maybe he'll even sing a song when he finally does so. As Klosterman writes: "Is there anything more attractive than a polite person with limitless self-belief? There is not. First, you must love yourself. And if you do that convincingly enough, others will love you too much."<sup>[37]</sup> And as Tolentino posits, the most authentically American character type is one who lacks all

authenticity, who puts the truth up for grabs and claims to be a “straight talker” while denigrating the “fake news” of verifiable facts. Some of us may know that we’re being had, but the truth is, right now, we’ve got trouble. We’re all living in River City. And in such a political landscape, it should be no surprise that once theatres reopen at the end of the coronavirus pandemic, a revival of *The Music Man* is returning to Broadway. The figure of the con artist in musical theatre isn’t skipping town anytime soon.

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[1] The gendered term persists in discourse on this topic, despite the obvious fact that scams can be (and are) perpetrated by those of any gender. In fact, my central examples of con artists are all male, and for that reason, as well as the general term of the “confidence man,” I periodically use the male pronoun throughout this paper when discussing grifters. A broader study might examine the few female examples in musical theatre, such as the perpetrator of the long con in *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*, but I suggest that this is an exception that proves the rule.

[2] Donald J. Trump with Tony Schwartz, *Trump: The Art of the Deal* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1987), 366-67.

[3] Chuck Klosterman, *I Wear the Black Hat: Grappling with Villains (Real and Imagined)* (New York: Scribner, 2014), 41-43.

[4] Scott A. Sandage, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005). Especially noteworthy is Sandage’s quotation of Ralph Waldo Emerson, who wrote in 1842 that “nobody fails who ought not to fail. There is always a reason, *in the man*, for his good or bad fortune,” 46.

[5] Jia Tolentino, “The Fiends and the Folk Heroes of Grifter Season,” *The New Yorker*, 5 June 2018 (last accessed 10 January 2020), and Jia Tolentino, *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion* (New York: Random House, 2019), 195.

[6] See especially Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005) and *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006). Additionally, however, monographs and articles by Andrea Most, David Savran, Alisa Solomon, and Stacey Wolf articulate the ways in which musicals have been crucial in helping communities of Americans define themselves: from Jewish theatregoers, to middlebrow and middle-class audiences, queer viewers, and women.

[7] David Savran, “The Do-Re-Mi of Musical Theatre Historiography.” In Joseph Roach, ed., *Changing the Subject: Marvin Carlson and Theatre Studies, 1959 – 2009* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 225.

[8] Lin-Manuel Miranda, “Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story,” *Hamilton: An American Musical*, ed. Jeremy McCarter (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2016), 280-81.

[9] Historians disagree about when this period existed and whether the term has any real validity. Some, such as John Kenrick, Raymond Knapp, and Larry Stempel, argue that the so-called “golden age” existed only for around two-and-a-half decades, from *Oklahoma* (1943) until the advent of rock musicals and director-driven concept musicals in the late 1960s. Mark N. Grant, the most forceful defender of the concept of a golden age, posits that this glorious period existed from the opening of *Show Boat* in 1927 through 1966. Many critics, however, sensibly question this perception. Kenrick argues that any musical with lasting commercial or artistic impact on the form should justifiably be considered as great as any work from the mid-twentieth century, and Stempel goes further, pointing out that philosophies such as Grant’s are grounded in artistically conservative and historically inaccurate nostalgia: “while belief in a Golden Age has been the ideological underpinning for resuscitating part of the Broadway repertoire and awakening new audiences to old excellences, it has also tended to diminish the value of newer work.” Mark N. Grant, *The Rise and Fall of the Broadway Musical* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004); John Kenrick, *Musical Theatre: A History* [Second Edition] (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 4; and Larry Stempel, *Showtime: A History of the Broadway Musical Theater* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 657–8.

[10] Stuart Hecht, *Transposing Broadway: Jews, Assimilation, and the American Musical* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 89, 4.

[11] Andrea Most, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 6.

[12] Gary Lindberg, *The Confidence Man in American Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 253-58.

[13] David W. Maurer, *The American Confidence Man* (Springfield, IL: Charles C Thomas, Publisher, 1974), 3.

[14] See Robert B. Ray, “The Thematic Paradigm,” in Sonia Maasik and Jack Solomon, eds., *Signs of Life in the U.S.A.: Readings on Popular Culture for Writers* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2012), 377-86.

[15] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence, ed. J. P. Mayer (New York: Perennial Classics, 2000), 283.

[16] Susan Kuhlmann, *Knave, Fool, and Genius: The Confidence Man as He Appears in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1973), 6.

[17] Quotations from *The Music Man* come from: Meredith Willson, *The Music Man*, unpublished typescript libretto, ©1958 Frank Music Corp. and Reinmer Corporation. 1-1-5.

[18] Kimberly Faithbroker Canton argues that, in idolizing high culture, Hill's particular scam in fact cements *The Music Man* as a kind of middlebrow work, itself perpetrating the same sort of scam. She writes that "*The Music Man*, with its optimistic, faith-based ideology, sells a version of culture that is...lucrative in its averageness and uniquely American in its easy reconciliation of diametrically opposed notions of art and commerce, patriotism and individualism, truth and scam. *The Music Man* is an anti-intellectual ode to the middlebrow that cleverly sells the very premise that makes it a commercial triumph." Kimberly Faithbroker Caton, "'Who's Selling Here?': Sounds Like *The Music Man* Is Selling and We're Buying," *Modern Drama* 51, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 56.

[19] Willson, 1-2-15.

[20] Laurie A. Finke and Susan Aronstein, "Got Grail? Monty Python and the Broadway Stage," *Theatre Survey* 48, no. 2 (November 2007): 290. Finke and Aronstein put *Spamalot* within this tradition, as opposed to more "deconstructive musicals of the 1970s such as *Chicago* and *A Chorus Line*" and the works of Stephen Sondheim.

[21] Willson, v.

[22] Willson., 1-2-9.

[23] Stacey Ellen Wolf, "'Defying Gravity': Queer Conventions in the Musical *Wicked*," *Theatre Journal* 60, no. 1 (March 2008): 17.

[24] Willson, 2-3-18.

[25] Nash, N. Richard, Harvey Schmidt, and Tom Jones, *110 in the Shade*, unpublished typescript libretto © 1977 and Nash, N. Richard, *The Rainmaker: A Romantic Comedy* (New York: Random House, 1955), vi. The text of the stage direction is nearly identical in both versions. All quotations from the musical come from this typescript.

[26] Nash Schmidt, and Jones, *110 in the Shade*, 1-1-2.

[27] Nash, *The Rainmaker*, vii.

[28] Nash, Schmidt, and Jones, *110 in the Shade*, 1-3-31.

[29] Nash, Schmidt, and Jones *110 in the Shade*., iii and Nash, *The Rainmaker*, 57. Note how Nash

highlights that Starbuck is “gentle,” and that, like Arlecchino, he carries a wooden stick.

[30] In a longer study of con artistry and American theatre more broadly, it would be worth examining the impact of race on whether or not the scammer achieves forgiveness from the community he bamboozles. It’s worth mentioning the 2007 revival of *110 in the Shade*, a color-conscious staging in which Lizzie Curry (played by Audra McDonald) was black. Steve Kazee, a white actor, played Starbuck. Thus, his character wasn’t just duping a drought-ridden town in hard times, he was a white man telling a black woman who had never seen herself as pretty that she was beautiful. Of course, the truth of this statement was obvious to the audience, but in this staging, Starbuck’s “charming” con was thus explicitly racialized. Furthermore, the role of race in *The Music Man* has been explored by Warren Hoffman in *The Great White Way: Race and the Broadway Musical*. In his third chapter, “The Racial Politics of *West Side Story* and *The Music Man*,” Hoffman argues that racial politics have at least something to do with *The Music Man*’s winning of the Tony for Best Musical over the revolutionary and genre-transforming *West Side Story*. Hoffman positions *The Music Man* as a work brimming with a nostalgia for (all-white) small-town Americana. He demonstrates how in “Ya Got Trouble,” Harold Hill uses ragtime, “code for African Americans?” as a “scare tactic.” Warren Hoffman, *The Great White Way: Race and the Broadway Musical* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 82-110.

[31] Nash, *The Rainmaker*, 162. The line is identical in the musical; Nash, *110 in the Shade*, 2-4-27.

[32] In the original play, File is the deputy.

[33] Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity*, 145. Knapp goes on to point out that both authority figures who could punish Hill and Charlie Cowell, who exposes him as a con man, never sing during the show, thus failing to earn the audience’s sympathy.

[34] Steven Levenson, Benj Pasek, and Justin Paul, *Dear Evan Hansen* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2017), 23-24.

[35] Levenson, Pasek, and Paul., 163.

[36] Jason Zinoman, “Dear Evan Hansen, You Are a Creep,” *Slate*, 6 June 2017 (last accessed 10 January 2020).

[37] Klosterman, 57.

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