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Exploring Masculinity in *Newsies*

Masculinity can take many different forms and expressions. Some portrayals of masculinity are harmful as they are generalized, or condone behaviors that perpetuate stereotypes and harmful attitudes. While as a society we have become more critical of toxic masculinity and the traits that come with it, the question arises as to whether these shifts have been reflected on the Broadway stage. The 2012 Broadway musical *Newsies* features a majority male cast, which allows for varying representations of masculinity in the show. *Newsies* sheds light on the evolving representations of masculinity on the Broadway stage, proving that male characters can break free from rigid stereotypes and exhibit diverse traits. By analyzing specific characters it becomes clear that despite leaning into stereotypes, *Newsies* ultimately demonstrates varying representations of masculinity. Whether it's Jack's multifaceted character challenging traditional gender norms or Davey's calm and composed demeanor deviating from the hypermasculine aggression often seen on stage, the musical showcases the complexity and diversity of masculinities. This portrayal reflects a broader societal shift towards recognizing and celebrating the diversity within masculinity, paving the way for more inclusive narratives in the entertainment industry.

Traditional Broadway shows seem to follow a conventional storyline where the male lead is expected to be tough, heroic, aggressive, and dominant. Daniel Ricken, in his dissertation, asserts that it seems that “most of the Golden Age musicals feature male principals that are

characterized by their aggression and/or military leadership” (Ricken). Some well-known examples of these characters are Captain von Trapp, Lt. Cable, King of Siam. Thus it becomes clear that currently “men in Western society are expected to perform their gender in line with one of two binary archetypes: the hypermasculine strong man or the non-masculine effeminate” (Ricken, iii). Of course, in modern times Broadway musicals have left some of these stereotypical characterizations in the past. However the portrayal of masculinity is still nuanced as these archetypes are obviously prevalent in many shows. And while *Newsies* does lean into these stereotypes, there are a variety of portrayals, that don’t all perfectly align with this binary. This proves, that male characters can exist in the space between these these two extremes, challenging traditional notions of masculinity in the process. In doing so, *Newsies* contributes to a more inclusive and diverse representation of masculinity in the world of musical theater.

Inspired by the 1899 Newsboys strike in New York City and based on the 1992 movie, *Newsies* achieved significant success upon its 2012 Broadway debut. Well-known talents came together to create the show, including a book by Harvey Fierstein, a score by Alan Menken, lyrics by Jack Feldman, and Jeff Calhoun as the director. The musical follows the story of Jack Kelly, a young newsboy who hopes to pursue his dreams outside of the city. Jack befriends many of the other newsies, including Crutchie, who has a bad leg and often needs support. Jack acts as a leader, inspiring his fellow newsies with his charisma and determination. Davey and his little brother Les join the group, as they pick up work to help support their father who was just laid off from his job. Though they come from different backgrounds, they are able to fit right in with the other newsies and ultimately work well together. When Joseph Pulitzer, the publisher of New York World, raises newspaper prices unfairly, Jack and his fellow newsies rebel. They start a union and go on strike to fight for fair prices. The newsies work together with Katherine, a

struggling reporter who they later find out is Pulitzer's daughter, to fight against her father. Jack and Katherine fall in love in the process and are eventually able to make a deal with Pulitzer to bring back down newspaper prices.

Jack is immediately portrayed as a tough, strong, and natural leader who may be at first mistaken for fitting into the hypermasculine category. In the opening number of the show, he sings "Santa Fe" with Crutchie, where he dreams about living a life outside of the city. He wears a sleeveless, unbuttoned shirt that highlights his muscular figure. When singing with Crutchie, or any character for that matter, he sings the lower melody. This musical choice portrays his assertive masculinity and subtly suggests that he aligns with the hypermasculine category. As the story progresses, it becomes clear that Jack has other sides. When Jack, Davey, and Les first visit Ms. Medda's theater, Jack's mural is on display, showcasing his artistic side. Later during the show at the theater, he draws a photo of Katherine on the spot. Being an artist, and more specifically doing the style of art as Jack does, is stereotypically categorized as feminine. Jack also is deeply empathic towards Crutchie, almost assuming a parent role. This combination of characteristics proves that he doesn't perfectly fit into either category. Perhaps a better way to characterize Jack is as a multifaceted individual whose identity challenges conventional expectations of masculinity.

It is important to consider the female lead, Katherine, and her role in challenging Jack's masculinity representation. Ultimately, her character confirms that Jack doesn't embody the hypermasculine character, as she is a strong, independent woman who knows how to stand up for herself and he doesn't push her on this. When she reveals her plan to stop her father's unfair practices she uses language that encourages Jack to reconsider his biases, for example "or is it because I'm a girl?" and "this would be a good time to shut up" (Fierstein). Throughout the

show, Katherine continues to find her voice and she reminds Jack that strength and leadership qualities are not exclusive to any gender. This dynamic adds depth to both characters.

Crutchie, on the other hand, aligns more directly with a single category: the effeminate man. This is because he has traits that would traditionally be considered “feminine,” for example, he’s dependent, weak, caring, innocent, and never really aggressive or dominant. In “Santa Fe” Crutchie wears baggy clothing that draws attention to his small, frail frame. He also sings the higher harmony with Jack, which is a high part in a male’s range. Jack also sings “just hold on, kid” which proves that Crutchie heavily relies on his support, despite the two being about the same age (Fierstein). These choices confirm that he is meant to be perceived as more submissive compared to Jack. Crutchie is also physically targeted the most out of the group. He is beaten up early on by the Delancey brothers and he is the only newsie that gets caught and locked in the Refuge during the show, though Jack has been there before. These elements of the plot all contribute to Crutchie’s characterization as the weaker, effeminate male character.

Davey acts as the mature, big-brother figure. He watches out for and cares for his little brother Les, and he is calm and collected. He, like Jack, exists in the space between the two categories. However, there are some key differences between him and Jack’s character. First Davey seems to be much calmer and less prone to resorting to physical violence. Jack has aggressive moments at times and lets his anger get the best of him, but Davey remains even keel. In the showstopping “Seize the Day” number, Davey actually discourages his fellow newsies from fighting. On the first day of the strike, some scabs decide to keep working despite the strike. The supporting newsies get angry and start to attempt to fight them. Davey steps in the way and says “We all stand together or we don’t have a chance,” keeping them from physically confronting the scabs (Fierstein). Davey's composed demeanor and commitment to non-violence

add depth to his character, highlighting the diversity of portrayals of masculinity within the newsies ensemble. His character challenges the notion that masculinity must always be associated with aggression, demonstrating that strength can also be found in unity and resilience.

Joseph Pulitzer has characteristics that would suggest he falls under the “hypermasculine” male category. He is aggressive, cold, and really shows no empathy or concern for anyone other than himself. He is only concerned with his own profit and doesn’t care who he has to take advantage of to get more money. This is evident as he even says: “Anyone who doesn’t act in his own self-interest is a fool” (Fierstein). Pulitzer’s representation of hypermasculinity and even toxic masculinity is the most prevalent in the musical. This choice is interesting as he is the main antagonist or villain. In Golden Age musicals, these types of characters were the male lead protagonists, however, now characters embodying these traits are villains. This is significant because it proves that male characters embracing toxic masculine traits are no longer glamorized as they aren’t the protagonist, or leading man anymore. In Pulitzer’s song “The Bottom Line” his disregard for others becomes clear. The musical number starts as Pulitzer is trying to find a way to sell more papers. He clearly doesn’t have a solution to his problem, so he tries to get his coworkers to come up with a solution for him by using language like: “there’s an answer right before your eyes, you’re just not thinking this through” (Fierstein). Eventually, when they come up with an idea he likes, he responds: “my thought exactly, it is genius” (Fierstein). He’s then taking credit for their ideas and even dismisses his female coworker. Pulitzer’s secretary, Hannah, critiques his idea of raising the prices for the newsies saying, “It’s going to be awfully rough on those children,” to which Pulitzer responds, “Nonsense I’m giving them a real-life lesson in economics” (Fierstein). This interaction makes it clear how Pulitzer disrespects women and confirms his true motivations, reinforcing his

hypermasculine and self-centered nature.

These evolving representations of masculinity on the Broadway stage also helped attract new audiences. As James Lovelock, who wrote a dissertation titled “‘Not Just For Gays Anymore’: Men, Masculinities and Musical Theatre,” confirms “musical theatre as a genre has been stereotypically seen as gay” (Lovelock, 1). This means that musical theatre’s target audience has been mostly women and gay men. That is not to say that there aren’t straight men who like musical theatre or that it is exclusive to any particular group, but traditional stereotypes have contributed to this idea. *Newsies* features a variety of different portrayals of masculinity and even challenges traditional norms. These representations on the Broadway stage could help expand the appeal of musical theatre and draw a more diverse crowd. By showcasing a range of male characters with nuanced and authentic traits, *Newsies* breaks away from stereotypical molds, making musical theatre more relatable and appealing to a broader spectrum of individuals, regardless of their gender or sexual orientation.

Ultimately, *Newsies* is not only a heartwarming story inspired by historical events but also serves as a reflection of evolving representations of masculinity on the Broadway stage. The characters in the show break away from traditional stereotypes, challenging the binary archetypes of hypermasculinity and effeminacy. Jack's multifaceted character challenges conventional gender norms, and Pulitzer's characterization as a villain adds complexity to the exploration of masculinity. The inclusion of a diverse range of masculine traits in the storyline contributes to a more inclusive and accurate representation of masculinity in the world of musical theater, also allowing a more diverse audience to connect with the show.

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