

1 Overview of Gypsy and the Broadway Musical Madwoman

Introduction

Gypsy: a complex musical with an operatic “madwoman” at its helm. That is a workable, nutshell description of *Gypsy: A Musical Fable*, the 1959 Broadway show that turned the genre on its head. *Gypsy*’s protagonist, Rose, a complicated mother and a delusional fame-seeker, has become an emblematic character on Broadway who represents many feminist ideals while also embodying the problematic romanticism of the madwoman and fall to her demise with a glorious mad scene, “Rose’s Turn.” Operatic in its dramatic depth yet robed in the vestiges of the contemporary Broadway musical, *Gypsy* ushered in a new era of American musical theater, blending the thematic elements of opera, vaudeville, and the musical play. A somewhat twisted rendition of the archetypal American dream tale, it tells the life story of famous burlesque performer Gypsy Rose Lee through the exploits of the eponymous character’s mother, Rose Hovick, from her daughter’s childhood in vaudeville through her rise to striptease fame.

The analyses in this Element demonstrate how Rose progressively descends into “madness” throughout the course of *Gypsy*’s plot and score, exploring how the musical adaptation creates a madwoman in many places where she did not exist in the original source, Gypsy Rose Lee’s memoir. The question of *why* the creators of *Gypsy* turned Rose into a madwoman is ultimately answered in my comparison of the musical to opera: elevation of the genre. Aleksei Grinenko’s book *Seriously Mad: Mental Distress and the Broadway Musical* presents the notion that “from the midcentury on, the stage musical has exploited the symbolic capital of psychoanalytic views of interiority to shore up its aspirations to the domain of ‘serious’ art theater” (Grinenko, 2023: 2). Grinenko argues that, in *Gypsy*, “madness, endowed with a preeminent power to articulate and transmit insights and sway the audience, comes to stand for theater par excellence” (Grinenko, 2023: 11). My analytical goal, then, in comparing Rose to an operatic madwoman, and “Rose’s Turn” to an operatic mad scene, is to substantiate this notion of “serious theater,” as well as explore the spectator’s viewpoint of Rose’s madness from a feminist perspective.

Within the broader framework of the topic of the “madwoman,” *Gypsy*’s Rose is important both in the Broadway musical’s history and historiography. Historically speaking, *Gypsy* was written at the start of a turning point in musical theater, representing a category that straddled the “Golden Age” style of contemporary works by writers such as Rodgers and Hammerstein and the highly serious, more conceptual style of Stephen Sondheim, who served as *Gypsy*’s lyricist. Although preceded on the Broadway stage by maddened

female protagonists such as Wanda in *Rose-Marie* (1924) and Azuri in *The Desert Song* (1926), *Gypsy*'s Rose stands apart for its musical legacy and stage legacy, having been revived on Broadway five times (1974, 1989, 2003, 2008, and 2024), once in the West End (2015) after its 1973 premiere, and two film versions (1962 and 1993). Holding such a crucial place in the Broadway canon and in musical theater history, Rose could be considered the “mother” of the contemporary Broadway musical madwoman – creating a long legacy of madwoman protagonists in hit Broadway productions that followed in the decades after *Gypsy* – and thus invites a great deal of analytical attention.¹ This Element's contribution to the show's historiography includes a detailed comparison of the musical's libretto to the original source, examination of journalistic reviews, and musical analysis of multiple numbers, including Rose's “mad scene.”

Labeled a “musical fable” possibly because its plot seems more like a fairy-tale than real life, *Gypsy* is hard to categorize within the musical theater canon. It possesses heavy themes like many of Rodgers and Hammerstein's hits such as *South Pacific*, which addresses the topics of racism and war, or *Carousel*, which tackles difficult concepts such as domestic abuse – but *Gypsy* possesses none of the love-story themes featured in these shows. Nor is it an operatic dark tale like later Sondheim musicals, such as *Sweeney Todd*. It is not the typical brash Ethel Merman comedy of earlier decades, such as *Annie Get Your Gun*. *Gypsy* also does not fit emphatically into the Golden Age musical style category, not only because it blends musical comedy with serious thematic content as well as vaudeville-inspired numbers, but also because it excludes many key elements of that formulaic mid-century style. Sondheim explains how he and Styne wrote *Gypsy* “in the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical form – where you take a story and tell it with scene-song-scene-song, where peaks of emotion are carried forward into song” (Sondheim, in Gordon, 1992: 99). However, *Gypsy* also positions itself outside of that form in numerous ways. There is no true chorus, no title song, and neither is there a true romantic plot line or a likeable hero. As critic Walter Kerr wrote after seeing *Gypsy*'s opening night on Broadway: “I'm not sure whether ‘Gypsy’ is new fashioned, or old-fashioned, or integrated, or non-integrated. The only thing I'm sure of is that it's the best damn musical I've seen in years” (Kerr, 1959).

In this vein, and taking it a step further by comparing *Gypsy* to the fully integrated and emotion-packed genre of opera, *Gypsy* in many ways embodies what musicologist Richard Taruskin calls “tragicomedy,” the category embraced

¹ These shows include, among others: *Chicago* (1975), *Sweeney Todd* (1979), *Sunset Boulevard* (1994), and *Next to Normal* (2009).

by nineteenth-century Italian opera composer Giuseppe Verdi. Quoting Verdi's contemporary Alessandro Manzoni, Taruskin describes this genre particularly in the context of adaptations of Shakespeare, a "mixture of the grave and the burlesque, the touching and the low" (Taruskin 2010: 576). While *Gypsy* is not exactly adapted from the likes of Shakespeare, the definition holds true. *Gypsy* is simultaneously funny and serious, light and dark, low-brow and high-brow. Thus, as a Broadway musical-style "tragicomedy," *Gypsy* the musical takes the story of Gypsy Rose Lee's memoir from a fabulous autobiographical tale into the "fable" that Larry Stempel describes as "[defying] the stereotype: a musical comedy with a meaning; a musical comedy with a mad scene" (Stempel, 2010: 454).

In defining Rose as a madwoman of operatic proportions, I borrow from Susan McClary's notion of *excess*, that female madness is "delineated musically through repetitive, ornamental, or chromatic excess" and that "normative [musical] procedures representing reason are erected around them to serve as protective frames" for other non-mad characters (McClary, 1991: loc. 1236). This analytical approach as applied to *Gypsy* incorporates detailed interpretation of the musical style, lyrical framing, virtuoso singing methods, and motivic repetition that appear in Rose's musical numbers throughout *Gypsy*, most especially in "Rose's Turn." In terms of framing Rose's excess, I consider the "sane lenses" through which the audience is guided to view Rose as mad; namely, the lens of Herbie, who I call the "male moral compass," and the lens of her two daughters, June and Louise (later known as Gypsy Rose Lee). These frames appear in both libretto and score. In Section 2, I consider the creation of the Herbie frame in the musical adaptation from the original source book. In Sections 3 and 4, I examine the frames as set within Rose's musical numbers.

I also define Rose's madness as being signified by her clear departures from "reality" throughout *Gypsy*'s plot and score. Rose's frequent delusions, her "dreams," are present in the libretto; musically, they are witnessed particularly in the use of motivic repetition. As Joseph Straus explains, a frequent manifestation of madness in musical contexts is the hearing of voices, often represented musically through repeated quotations (Straus, 2018: 94).

The most glaring representation of Rose's madness in *Gypsy* is, of course, in the mad scene: Rose's final number, "Rose's Turn." My analysis of *Gypsy*'s "mad scene" in Section 4 is two-pronged, considering both the music and the performance. Regarding the latter, I examine interpretation of the role by three Broadway and West End performers: Ethel Merman, Angela Lansbury, and Imelda Staunton, analyzing the concept of agency around Rose's descent into "madness" during this scene. For although the musical's creators wrote "Rose's Turn" as an operatic mad scene, the performers themselves possess the

agency to interpret that mad scene in their own fashions. This dynamic creates a “feminist gaze” – but also one rife with the complexities of acting “madness” as a mental state.

In this Element’s exploration of Rose as an operatic madwoman, the underlying question remains: can Rose’s madness be subversive, or feminist, especially considering the problematic nature of operatic madwomen and their demises under the patriarchy? The answer is complicated. There is a difference between representation and exploitation of “madness” as a character trait; the former engenders acceptance, the latter stigmatization. Too often the real representations of mental illness take a back seat to the spectacular elements of horror, satire, or melodrama. Furthermore, when madness is embodied specifically by a madwoman, the issues of representation are further complicated by the feminist concerns of gender and power dynamics. Whether she is oversexualized, violent, obsessive, or delusional, the madwoman exists within a gendered framework.

Analysis of madwomen on the musical stage continuously raises the question of agency: do they gain control through their madness, or does their madness control them? Catherine Clément argues that the operatic madwoman’s madness liberates her and represents ultimate happiness; madness is an escape from the patriarchal controls that have determined the madwoman’s life until the point of her mad scene. Using Donizetti’s titular character from *Lucia di Lammermoor* as an exemplar of the trope, she explains,

[Lucia] dismisses those who are separated from her forever, those who do not comprehend how perfectly complete is her joy. The curtain falls on Lucia’s jubilation, set free and rising still . . . she is a “demented woman,” but she is happy. (Clément, 1988: 89–90)

Other scholars disagree, however, with the notion that a woman’s madness leads to her liberation or incites feminist sympathy. Elaine Showalter argues that even murderous madwomen do not escape male domination. Rather, they escape “one specific, intolerable exercise of women’s wrongs by assuming an idealized, poetic form of pure femininity as the male culture had construed it: absolutely irrational, absolutely emotional, and, once the single act is accomplished, absolutely passive” (Showalter, 1985: 17). While both scholarly interpretations of the madwoman reveal the male-dominated frame in which she operates, their analytical conclusions are diametrically opposed: Clément considers her a hero, while Showalter believes her to be a victim.

Susan McClary provides a more nuanced view of the madwoman in this regard. She agrees with Clément’s assessment, but her analysis of Lucia’s madness-inspired freedom relates to the musical characterization; she argues

that “Lucia has far too much energy” for the narrow confines” of typical musical structures. Thus, she explains, we should not “read Lucia solely as an instance of feminine dementia . . . For in her revolt against patriarchal oppression and musical conformity, she is also a romantic hero whose energy defies stifling social convention” and her music makes her powerful. “Her tragic end potentially enflames the resentment of all kinds . . . and, because she is mad, Lucia cannot, of course, be held responsible for deliberate resistance. Thus she can be victim and heroine simultaneously – in short, a martyr” (McClary, 1991: loc. 1402).

McClary’s both/and approach frames the madwoman with the complexity required of this multidimensional trope. Ultimately, Lucia is both hero and victim; she kills Arturo and she is musically resonant, yet she must be mad – outside the frame of the norm – in order to accomplish her victory, and consequently dies. The madwoman’s mad scene exposes the patriarchy, even if she cannot survive this act; thus, although the operatic madwoman is confined by her madness, she is simultaneously empowered by it. Borrowing this theoretical stance, I analyze *Gypsy*’s Rose an anti-hero in her own plot trajectory, her madness rendering her both victorious and defeated, each in their own complicated fashion.

Mary Ann Smart, however, states that while “madness is one of the few ways an operatic heroine can escape the near-inevitable plot process of seduction and death,” such an interpretation “may too easily lead to the conclusion that all structures are male and repressive, and all freedom is female and positive: a difficult position in any creative context, since most works of art depend on structure in order to communicate” (Smart, 1992: 119–120).

Carolyn Abbate further complicates madwomen’s positionality within an operatic performance; she posits that in operas featuring women, the female voice makes the performer an authorial figure because hearing a female voice is a “complicated phenomenon” in which “visually, the character singing is the passive object of our gaze. But aurally, she is resonant; her musical speech drowns out everything in range, and we sit as passive objects, battered by that voice” (Abbate, 1993: 254). Abbate demonstrates how a female opera lead possesses this voice and thus renders a power otherwise unavailable to her within the male authorship of the opera. Abbate’s theoretical stance proves particularly useful for the analysis of *Gypsy* because she discusses music written by men for female characters and actors; *Gypsy*’s entire primary writing and productive team, with the exception of the female lead performers, was male. Thus, to calculate the creative power of women in musicals, the analyses in this Element consider the authorial voice as theorized by Abbate. The voice of the belting diva of musical theater can be interpreted in much the same way as the

virtuoso voice of the operatic prima donna – for example, the brash and loud belt-style singing by Rose in *Gypsy* as established by the character’s originator, Ethel Merman.

However, even when a female performer creates, exaggerates, or reclaims a character’s madness, problems remain inherent to the madwoman trope. Megan Jenkins, for example, steers away from Abbate’s notion of authorial voice in favor of a more disability-centered approach. Jenkins argues that “madness is a social construct that is often used to control individuals’ behavior, especially women’s” and so she aims to be “part of the movement of humanist scholars who seek to challenge sexist and heterosexist deployment of mental illness diagnoses” (Jenkins, 2010: 1–2). Within operatic frameworks, Jenkins posits, madness is most often a punishment for transgression against gender or sexual norms, and this correlation complicates an audience’s understanding and stigmatization of mental illness.

Madness and Women in the Early and Mid Twentieth Century: Contextualizing Rose

Megan Jenkins explains that

While opera and opera reception are valuable resources for scholars to examine the culture, politics, and history that gave rise to that specific work, it is important to remember that we are examining representations of madness, and not actual physical or psychical experiences of madness . . . These characters – even when based on real people’s lives – are crafted to represent contemporaneous conceptions of madness. (Jenkins, 2010: 9–10)

The “contemporaneous conception of madness” at the time of *Gypsy*’s creation aligns with American society in the early and mid twentieth century. Rose’s plot trajectory is an extreme version of the quintessential “American dream” that permeates American culture.

Rose’s pursuit of a fabled American romanticism in her chosen enterprise, show business, is relatable, not only to the mid-century audience of *Gypsy*’s original Broadway run, who lived in close historical proximity to the 1920s and 1930s era in which *Gypsy* is set, but to the perennial American audience as well. The “rags to riches” success story pervades both the Broadway musical canon – as shown in *My Fair Lady* (1956), *Funny Girl* (1964), and *Annie* (1977), just to name a few – and the larger American Zeitgeist. In an interview for *The New York Times*, Sondheim says that “the fact that [Rose is] monstrous to her daughters and the world is secondary . . . She’s a very American character, a gallant figure and a life force” (Rich, 2003).

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However “secondary,” Rose’s relationship to her daughters – and her very identity as a mother – is a key component of her character, and her positioning within the patriarchal culture she fights so hard against. Keith Garebian explains in *The Making of Gypsy* that Rose is

a larger-than-life representation of American Mom-ism, that syndrome that so bedevils many a generation that feel smothered by the hand that rocks the cradle and tightens the silver cord . . . When her turn comes to dream for herself, she seizes it with the sort of rough readiness that we, not inappropriately, identify as the essence of American enterprise and opportunism. (Garebian, 1994: 12)

According to Garebian’s statement, those two aspects – Rose’s “Mom-ism” and her opportunism – are deeply connected, although they both drive her in different ways. Rose’s opportunism depends on her motherhood (because her enterprise is her daughters, themselves), but ultimately, she resents the fact that her motherhood gets in the way of her own success – as she portrays in “Rose’s Turn.”

Rose’s most “grievous” sin in *Gypsy*, some would argue, is when she does finally achieve success, but at the cost of her daughter’s “morals,” in the moment she pushes teenage Louise into the world of burlesque. Of course, Rose’s sense of “morals” has never truly existed; Herbie’s character serves as a sort of moral compass for Rose’s actions – as discussed in Section 2 – but for Rose, burlesque is simply the last exit on her show business odyssey. Ethan Mordden argues, “That Rose sends Louise out into the sleazy darkness of burlesque to strip, losing her lover [Herbie] but creating a star, tells us what Rose is: an American. Nothing matters but making it, stardom” (Mordden, 1998: 248). Similarly, Howard Kissel explains that “Rose’s hunger for success through her daughters is so desperate, so unyielding that she forces Louise into burlesque, a huge and humiliating step down from vaudeville” (Kissel, in Engel, 2006: 23).

Some viewers may interpret Rose’s hand in Louise’s career shift into “sleazy” burlesque as the action of a madwoman, deranged by her greed for success. This interpretation adheres to the notion that the cultural Zeitgeist of 1959 America would not accept a “positive” representation of mother figure who sends her daughter into an “immoral” life as a stripper; thus, Rose was instead written as a complicated, monstrous, or even unhinged mother figure for her role in kick-starting Gypsy Rose Lee’s career. However, a more nuanced point of view is also possible. On the one hand, Rose is portrayed as mad during the scene in which she pushes Louise onto the burlesque stage. In a manic monologue, Rose exclaims to Louise,

Baby, it's all right to walk out when they want you. But you can't walk out now when after all these rotten years, we're still a flop . . . Just do this, so we can walk away proud because we made it! Maybe only in burlesque, maybe only in second rate burlesque at that – but let's walk away a star! (Laurents, 1959: 2–4–34)²

On the other hand, however, there is irony in Rose's ramblings – because Louise really does make it; the audience knows that Gypsy Rose Lee becomes a huge success not just as a stripper, but as an author, comedian, talk show host, and of course, the real-life inspiration behind this very Broadway musical. As shown in her Act II strip sequence, Louise subverts the definition of “stripping” by demonstrating the innovations that became the hallmark of Gypsy Rose Lee's career: not emphasizing the removal of clothing, but rather focusing on the “tease” in striptease by adding humor, commentary, and personal flair to her routines. Through these innovations, Gypsy Rose Lee gains agency and creates a “feminist gaze,” much like that of Rose in her striptease sequence of “Rose's Turn,” as discussed in Section 4.

Maya Cantu explores both Louise's and Rose's subversion of the American dream – in Louise's success as a stripper, and in Rose's choice to live life on the road and relentlessly pursue her dreams despite the difficulties that arise from being a woman and a mother on such a journey. Cantu explains how Rose defies the story's two main male characters, Pop and Herbie, who encourage her to settle down. She argues that *Gypsy*, along with other musicals in the 1950s such as *Happy Hunting* (1956) and *Once Upon a Mattress* (1959), “powerfully adapted the most transformative of fairy tale icons to address changes for American women both in the labor force and in the public sphere,” which ultimately “meaningfully contributed to women's liberation” in the mid twentieth century (Cantu, 2015: 201). Similarly, in a review of *Gypsy* for *The Baltimore Sun*, Margaret McManus claimed Rose as “a symbol of independence and strength. She's loud and gusty and free-wheeling. She is the master of her fate” (McManus, 1959).

Not only does Rose embody a complicated version of motherhood, she also lives a lifestyle that subverts the domestic expectations of mothers in the early and mid twentieth century. Throughout Rose's show business odyssey in *Gypsy*, she is placed at an impossible crossroads: is she a “bad” mother for wanting something more for her daughters – and simultaneously herself? Or should she

² Throughout this document, I analyze stage directions and lines as quoted in two different versions of the script. The first is the original 1959 script; the second, which I primarily use, is the widely published Theater Communications Group edition, published in 1989. The two versions show slight differences, but nothing that drastically changes any particular scene or character. I use both in order to create a fuller picture of the scenes and broader analysis of the characters.