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GATES

AWARD
ESSAY

2018

“IF IT’S NOT RIGHT, YOU HAVE TO PUT IT RIGHT”: THE PLAY AND WORK OF CHILDREN IN MATILDA THE MUSICAL

KRISTIN PERKINS

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In the *New York Times* review of *Matilda the Musical*, published in 2013 after the show transferred to Broadway, influential reviewer Ben Brantley writes that the musical is “the most satisfying and subversive musical to ever come out of Britain” (C1). Brantley’s claim concerning *Matilda*’s subversive nature is startlingly strong. Granted, the most famous imports from London are Andrew Lloyd Weber’s decidedly conservative mega musicals, but others have included *The Rocky Horror Show* (later turned into the infamous *Rocky Horror Picture Show*) and *Billy Elliot* (a story that takes on class, gender roles, and sexual stereotypes). I say this to illustrate that Brantley calling *Matilda* the most subversive British import is notable. While I am not suggesting that Ben Brantley is the arbiter of what is progressive on Broadway, his high-profile review is certainly significant in how it marks *Matilda* and makes explicit the musical’s revolutionary undertones.

And yet, despite its critical praise as revolutionary fare (or because of it), *Matilda* has also been the subject of mockery. It is not coincidental that the satirical musical revue *Forbidden Broadway* uses both the characters of Matilda¹ and the melody of “Revolted Children” from *Matilda* in its song “Exploiting Children.” After all, *Matilda* is a musical that not only employs a whole ensemble of children but is explicitly about childhood. In the satire, Gerard Alessandrini, the creative mind behind *Forbidden Broadway*, changes, “We are revolting children/Living in revolting times/We sing revolting songs/Using revolting rhymes,” to “We are exploited children/Living in exploitive times/We sing exhausting songs/Using explicit rhymes” (00:02:23-00:02:31). The satire lampoons the use of children in musicals: from overbearing parents, to exhausting

Perkins considers issues of subversive theatrical criticism and exploitative child labor as they combine in *Matilda* the Musical, examining the performance as a holistic, if ambivalent, production. In a play where the lead figure is a little girl, this essay uses the lens of gender and age to provide context for the revolutionary character of Matilda in a female-dominated play that critiques established norms, at the same time that the play is produced in, and by, a system that reproduces troubling power structures.

ABSTRACT

1. Alongside Matilda dance Billy Elliot from his titular musical and Gavroche from *Les Miserables* to highlight some additional child characters in recently produced musicals.

rehearsals, and, of course, the frank reality of aging out of work. While the satire might not be fair to the individual directors, tutors, parents, and agents that enable children to participate in theatre, it does successfully point towards the larger institutional problems of exploitative theatrical labor.

Ben Brantley is a theatre critic attuned to address, however incorrectly, what is presented before him on the lighted planks of the stage. Gerard Alessandrini is a theatre insider (fashioning himself as an outsider) as intent on skewering the production practices of Broadway as the typically mocked cheesy plots and bad music. This paper is neither as exultant as Brantley's review nor as irreverent as Alessandrini's satire, but it does seek to explore the nuanced relationship between the text of *Matilda* (as lauded by Brantley) and the context of *Matilda* (as roundly mocked by Alessandrini) to concede that both these pillars of Broadway have a point: *Matilda* is subversive in how it presents revolution and girlhood, and *Matilda* has labor practices that deserve to be questioned. Rather than these two arguments existing independently, I argue for a holistic understanding of theatre as both a practice and a product. To view theatre wholly as a product is to irresponsibly ignore the labor of theatre practitioners, but to view theatre wholly as a practice is to neglect the impact of storytelling on the audience.

Ultimately, this paper argues that the exciting progressive potential of *Matilda's* text is complicated by troubling practices that reflect a larger systemic problem in the realities of theatrical labor. While these practices may mitigate some of *Matilda's* "punch," it is wrong to say they wholly undermine *Matilda's* efforts at presenting disruptive resistance as positive and justified action against oppressive regimes. The revolution that *Matilda* advocates can be grouped around the two violent hierarchies of gender and age, just as the troubling labor practices of Broadway can be critiqued through the lens of gender and age. *Matilda* is an ambitious show that operates as a revolutionary performance, produced by practices and informed by traditions that are anti-revolutionary; my paper is built on this contradiction, recognizing ambivalence as more illuminating and truthful than pat resolutions.

A SUBVERSIVE PRODUCT

Matilda the Musical was conceived by the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) and based on the novel by Roald Dahl ("Matilda"). The musical tells the story of a girl prodigy, Matilda, who is unappreciated by her parents and then bullied by the evil headmistress of her school, Miss Trunchbull. These two authoritarian forces try to stop the precocious Matilda from learning in school, but Matilda teams up with another belittled outcast, Miss Honey. Miss Honey becomes Matilda's best friend and mentor and helps Matilda develop her latent telekinetic powers. Matilda uses these powers to defeat Miss Trunchbull by impersonating the ghost of Miss Trunchbull's murdered brother. When Matilda's parents get into trouble for fraud and run away, Miss Honey adopts Matilda and the new family presumably, lives happily ever after.

Matilda presents a world in which all authority figures (the parents and the headmistress) are either incompetent or evil, and the marginalized "little guy" has to fight dirty in the name of fairness. That *Matilda's* "little guy" is actually a little girl only serves to make the musical more excitingly progressive, that is, more revolutionary. Revolution, broadly defined, seeks to break down cultural

hegemonies. In *Matilda*, revolution specifically attacks two violent hierarchies: gender and age. Matilda's girlhood, the intersection of marginalization in these two hegemonic systems, positions her as a revolutionary figure, both young and female.

Matilda is presented as a revolutionary figure from the very moment she appears onstage. The audience is first introduced to Matilda during the high-energy opening of the musical, "Miracle," a song that parodies the cult of parenthood. The other children describe how their parents call them "miracles," even as the children demand more cake and fight amongst themselves. These children's parents swoop in to deliver on bratty demands, snapping pictures and loudly singing that their children are uniquely brilliant, beautiful, and talented. Matilda stands in obvious contrast to the rest of the children, as she informs the audience of the mean epithets her parents heap upon her: "lousy, little worm" and "jumped-up little germ." But Matilda is not a hopeless creature to be pitied. After a short scene that establishes her parents as comical villains who are alarmed and disgusted by Matilda's reading, Matilda storms off to her room, and a few major chords begin to bounce playfully on a few major chords. Matilda sits on a shelf high above her bed, her feet dangling as she begins to sing. As in many musicals, what follows is the protagonist's "I Want Song" (sometimes called the "I Wish" song).

The "I Want Song" acts as a quick way of establishing who the character is and exactly what the character wants (Kenrick). In this song, Matilda is clearly smart; she references *Romeo and Juliet* in one of the verses, and uses advanced vocabulary for a young child, such as "subsequent," and "inevitable." Her prodigy is linked to her other key characteristic: her desire for "fairness" and her willingness to rebel against authority figures. She sings:

Just because you find that life's not fair it
Doesn't mean that you just have to grin and bear it
If you always take it on the chin and wear it
Nothing will change. (Kelly and Minchin)

And she matches words to actions as she sneaks to the bathroom to add bleach to her abusive father's hair tonic. Matilda makes it clear that she will not sit idly by while experiencing injustice, but she also operates through playful deceit and trickery. In her "I Want Song," the audience learns that what Matilda wants most is justice, and her methodology in achieving that goal won't be peaceful.

Matilda revolts against the explicit discrimination she faces as a female.² The violent patriarchal hierarchy is reified by both of Matilda's parents very early on, setting up the hegemony against which revolution is possible. The musical makes it clear that gender discrimination begins at the very moment of Matilda's birth. The opening number has a break in the music in which Mrs. Wormwood gives birth to Matilda. When Mr. Wormwood bursts into the scene, he is dismayed to discover that his "son" doesn't have a "thingy,"

2. The term "female" is an awkward one, admittedly, and a term that sounds vaguely conservatively politicized. I use it when neither "woman" nor "girl" are appropriate; "woman" isn't because Matilda is not one and "girl" describes the intersection of femaleness and young age. Thus, "female" is an age-neutral way of identifying Matilda.

and then proclaims “I can’t find his frank and beans” (Kelly and Minchin). Mr. Wormwood’s preference for a son over a daughter is further highlighted in the next scene when the audience sees him treat his son Michael with fatherly affection while yelling at Matilda and insisting that she is a boy. Mr. Wormwood will continue to call Matilda a boy until the final scene of the play, implying the preference for maleness and reinforcing the patriarchal power structure that Matilda, as a revolutionary hero, must overcome.

While Mr. Wormwood continually denies Matilda’s femaleness, her mother wields femaleness as a weapon against Matilda, who is not behaving like a “proper girl.” Mrs. Wormwood complains, “it’s just not normal for a girl to be all ... thinking” (Kelly and Minchin). Mrs. Wormwood describes her thoughts on gender in the song “Loud.” When Miss Honey comes to visit Mrs. Wormwood to explain Matilda’s genius, Mrs. Wormwood dismisses Matilda and Miss Honey in the same way—by describing the proper role of women that both characters fail to live up to. As Mrs. Wormwood says, “I’m not in favor of girls getting all clever-pants, Miss Hussy. A girl should think about make-up and hair dye” (Kelly and Minchin), which is exactly what Mrs. Wormwood spends all day thinking about while being loud, brash, and arrogant. Mrs. Wormwood both dominates the stage and endorses regressive notions of womanhood. She becomes a Madonna-like star, at once independent and strong-willed and retrograde in sexualized femininity. Mrs. Wormwood thus represents a woman who has bowed to patriarchal expectations concerning beauty (though not necessarily to domesticity). The main way this functions in the plot is to juxtapose shallow materialism with intellect. Matilda (and Miss Honey) oppose the definition of femaleness to which Mrs. Wormwood subscribes. The juxtaposition of Matilda and her mother highlights the hegemonic system against which Matilda has revolted. Her parents’ reactions to Matilda reflect possible negative responses towards revolutionary women, either dismissal (the father) or incredulity (the mother) with the aim to constrain and silence, but Matilda refuses to be diminished.

Matilda as a female revolutionary figure also comes to light, albeit in more nuanced ways, in the main conflict of the musical: the fight against Miss Trunchbull. Miss Trunchbull is a drag performance that earned Bertie Carvel an Olivier Award and a Tony nomination. This performance is in the British tradition of the “panto dame” and can be likened to a drag performance of Lady Bracknell from *The Importance of Being Earnest*, or the always drag performance of Edna Turnblad from the more contemporary *Hairspray*. These characters are meant to be matronly figures, and rather than trying to hide the man (a kind of spectacle that is sometimes the goal of drag), the drag is utilized to highlight masculine characteristics for humorous effect (Coupland). The uninterest in hiding the man is truer of Miss Trunchbull than other panto dames. In *Matilda the Musical*, Miss Trunchbull has always been played by a tall man. The makeup is simple stage corrective with no noticeable eyeshadow, mascara, or lipstick, and there isn’t even a serious attempt to cover up five o’clock shadow which peaks through some of the publicity images of the range of actors cast as Trunchbull. While it’s hard to confirm from the theatre seats I’ve now occupied twice, I don’t think the actors are even required to shave their legs for the role. The only physical marker of femaleness is an amply padded bosom, but when combined with huge shoulder pads, the silhouette is far from feminine. As the primary villain,

the maleness of Trunchbull sets up the violent hierarchy in which revolution is justified and becomes a feminist act.

Miss Trunchbull is “supposed to be” a woman, but the presence of a man onstage is visible, affecting how audiences view the character. This visibility is an intentional choice; casting a man creates a patriarchy against which to revolt. Further, as theatre scholar Stacy Wolf argues, “Femininity and masculinity are invariably tied to other traits or tropes, working symbolically and metaphorically and taking on larger associations” (Wolf 8). These larger associations are often binary in nature and Miss Trunchbull’s gender “difference” acts as shorthand to quickly establish her as the primary villain. Miss Trunchbull is everything Matilda is not; maleness is the most noticeable distinction, and it becomes tied to other tropes that establish Miss Trunchbull as dichotomous to Matilda. Miss Trunchbull forces the children in her care through painful physical exercises while Matilda sings of rich internal worlds. “The Trunchbull” is large and looming while Matilda is small. Miss Trunchbull is cruel while Matilda is kind. In short, Miss Trunchbull represents the ruling class, much of which is tied up in the patriarchal order.

As an audience member, it takes on additional meaning to see Matilda not just fight against an oppressive schooling system, but fight against that system as embodied by a man. It takes on cultural meaning to see a man belittle the sweet-natured Miss Honey, to see a man mock children, to see a man try to squash the rumblings of revolt against his fascist regime. There is something particularly satisfying about seeing Matilda defeat Miss Trunchbull given the obvious presence of a man onstage. The visibility of the male actor in Miss Trunchbull then reinterprets Matilda’s revolt as a feminist act.

Matilda as a revolutionary female is certainly striking, but it should be noted that the musical is revolutionary in other ways concerning gender. In a media landscape dominated by male stories, the presence of women onstage can be interpreted as a revolt against traditional narratives that give primacy to men. While the now famous Bechdel test is meant to highlight a general trend and not identify whether a work is truly feminist or not, it is fair to say that *Matilda* smashes the test: not only do women regularly talk about things other than men, they very rarely talk about men at all.³ To say that this musical is entirely dominated by women is complicated by the fact that Trunchbull is played by a male actor. Even setting aside Miss Trunchbull, the female presence in *Matilda* is strong, presenting many unique and interesting women. While men perform in important supporting roles as Matilda’s father, brother, and classmate Bruce Bogtrotter, the play is driven by women whose roles in the script are not dependent on male characters. In a striking illustration of this, every solo in *Matilda* with the single exception of the Act Two opener, “Telly,” is sung by a female character. Many of these feature Matilda or Miss Honey soliloquizing in melody, but both Mrs. Wormwood and Miss Trunchbull also get their moments to shine. The sheer range of women and their considerable stage time constitutes a revolt against patriarchal storytelling.

3. The Bechdel test, coined in Allison Bechdel’s comic, *Dykes to Watch Out For*, in 1985, asks if there are (1) two women in the work of media that (2) talk to each other about (3) something other than a man. To pass the test was meant as a marker of more adequate female representations. Relatively few movies and TV shows manage to pass the test even today.

Musical theatre itself has often been a surprisingly “revolutionary” form in centralizing women. Women play a key role in the history of the American musical both onstage and in the audiences, and yet it remains rare to have a musical like *Matilda* in which the women’s respective story arcs aren’t at least partially defined by men and romance. In 1971, Lehman Engel, probably the most famous musical theatre conductor of the last century, wrote, “It should be clear that—to date—no musical without principal romantic involvement has worked. Romance is the fuel that ignited the music and lyrics” (113). Engel allowed for the possibility that in some unimaginable future, it would be possible for a musical without romance to work. *Matilda* does work without romantic plotlines and the male love interests they (heteronormatively) require. The fuel that ignites the music and lyrics of *Matilda* is often love, but it is the love between teacher and students, and between female friends. In this case, the love between Miss Honey and Matilda who touchingly end the play by hugging and proclaiming to the audience that “they had found each other” (Kelly and Minchin).

In the broad use of the term, it is “queer love,” an alternative to the heteronormative romantic love that so often dominates entertainment. While the driving force of *Matilda* leads to the revolutionary act of a young girl, a plot point that makes an overt political statement, the centrality of the relationship between Miss Honey and Matilda is itself revolutionary. As Stacy Wolf commented in her scholarship on *Wicked*, another musical with a central relationship between two women, “the progressive power of the piece is less in the overtly stated politics of the show ... and more in the representation and performative power of a pair of women onstage together” (218). This argument is furthered by the dialogue that makes explicit the “femaleness” of Miss Honey and Matilda’s relationship. Miss Honey actually calls herself a “little girl” self-deprecatingly. The friendship that Miss Honey establishes with Matilda is based on her ability to relate to Matilda through her femaleness. Both Miss Honey and Matilda describe themselves as “little girls” as a way of identifying their oppressed positionality and of relating to each other. The way the musical highlights not just women but female relationships marks it as feminist and revolutionary.

The second binary opposition at play in *Matilda* is between adult and child. In fact, Miss Trunchbull quips that she never was a child at all, thus distancing herself from the subordinate position in the violent hierarchy of age. This hegemonic system is less widely discussed than gender discrimination, but just as real. Childhood studies is heavily informed by feminist theory as it identifies childhood as a social construct and seeks to address the prejudice children face. As philosopher and psychotherapist Elisabeth Young-Breuhl argued, there is value in identifying prejudice against children as a systemic problem, a prejudice she calls “childism” (4). Categorizing childism as systemic gives meaning to various phenomena that discriminate against children, whether intentionally oppressive or not. Like the terms sexism or racism, childism can help identify prejudice, as well as address the construction of childhood itself as a potential problem. Like the patriarchal structures discussed above, childism also forms the backdrop in which revolt is made meaningful in *Matilda*.

Childism is on display throughout the musical. The motto of the school that Matilda attends is the fake Latin phrase “bambinatum est magitum” that

“translates” to “children are maggots” (Kelly and Minchin). Throughout the musical the children face abuse justified by Miss Trunchbull because of children’s perceived inferiority. Matilda herself is keenly aware of the way her age may affect her and addresses it in “Naughty.” Matilda sings, “Even if you’re little, you can do a lot. You/ Mustn’t let a little thing like ‘little’ stop you” (Kelly and Minchin). It is Matilda’s age that allows people in positions of power to oppress her so easily, but, as Matilda points out, it also provides room for her and her young classmates to revolt against an unjust system.

In the same way that Miss Trunchbull embodies a patriarchal system, she also embodies adult oppression over children. This oppression is realized in Miss Trunchbull’s philosophy which degrades children in the same breath that she derides all revolutionary tendency. In “The Smell of Rebellion,” Miss Trunchbull conflates childhood with revolution, framing childhood as the lack of obedience. This number suggests that Miss Trunchbull’s hatred of children comes from a fear of being overthrown, and in response the headmistress exhausts and bullies the subordinate group. Miss Trunchbull is certainly evil because of her verbal abuse of the children and (as revealed in a surprisingly dark twist) for murdering her own brother, but part of her villainy is the unbending discipline she expects of the young children in her care. Miss Trunchbull describes her time as a hammer-throwing champion as a metaphor for how children should be expected to behave, singing, “if you want to make the team/ you don’t need happiness or self-esteem/ you just need to keep your feet inside the line” (Kelly and Minchin). Since Trunchbull is clearly positioned as an unapologetic villain, her philosophy of hardline discipline is villainized. As this happens in the play, revolution is conflated with the playful expression of unfettered childhood itself.

This conflation of the playfulness of childhood with revolution is consistently demonstrated through the musical. Matilda’s rebellion is not just a result of prejudice against her, but also informed by her subject position as a child. In other words, her revolution is justified because of *childism*, and it is also *childish*. For example, just before the reprise of “Naughty,” Mr. Wormwood tears a library book apart and, while Matilda initially resists, after the destruction has already taken place she stands and calmly asks her father where the superglue is. She then laces the inside of Mr. Wormwood’s hat with the glue, enacting her revenge in a calculated way while singing the reprise. Her rebellion is actively disruptive and prankish. This revolt is uniquely informed by the position of a child. If enacted by an adult, the pranks Matilda uses to revolt would surely seem petty, but the cartoonish bullying of the parents and Matilda’s marginalized existence as a child seem not only to justify her “naughtiness” but to exalt it. In the same way that the musical subverts gender not just by showing a revolution against patriarchy but also honoring the perspectives of females by centralizing their experience, *Matilda* not only depicts a revolt against adults but also centralizes the experience of children as a revolutionary act in itself.

While Matilda may be the self-aware revolutionary figure who fully articulates her oppression, she is not the only revolting child. By the end of the play, all the children revolt in an expression of childhood, helping the musical fictionalize childhood as playful revolt. While it is Matilda alone who defeats Trunchbull, the actual emotional climax of the show comes in the large ensemble number “Revolting Children.” Just as in Matilda’s earlier rebellion against her parents,

this revolt revels in childishness. One little boy sings to “take out your hockey stick and use it as a sword,” and another sings that he will “draw rude pictures on the board.” It is violent and disruptive, playing on the double meaning of “revolting” as the children sing that they are collectively “a little bit naughty.” There are multivalent meanings here. There is something heartwarming in the grittiness of this climactic moment: the choreography is jerky, the staging feels disorganized, but, in a radical revolution, justice has been achieved. Matilda describes her special power made manifest as a light that results from anger. In leading the revolution to overthrow Miss Trunchbull, she has turned anger to light. The musical thus justifies Matilda’s anger and disruptive revolution against violent hierarchy. Children as a marginalized group have fought and won.

Yet this moment is also framed as the children reveling in their true nature. In this act of liberation, the children express an idealized school that celebrates childhood and individuality to the abandonment of order. The children, as a whole, finally find their voice as Bruce Bogtrotter sings the opening of the song, proudly proclaiming, microphone in hand, that “never again will she [Miss Trunchbull] take away my freedom” (Kelly and Minchin). The implication is that the children, freed of oppressive constraints, are naturally “revolting children.” Indeed, this aligns with many contemporary views of childhood as playful expression and children as not yet aware of the hegemonic systems they are growing up within. For this reason, the song “Revolting Children” feels like the rightful culmination of the musical’s through-line at the school. The students embrace the play and freedom of childhood as revolutionary tools to “send the Trunchbull bolting” and establish a more tolerant, child-like environment. The musical’s depiction of this revolution in which the adult authority is overthrown can be read, as Brantley argued, as subversive.

As a young girl, Matilda operates at the intersection of two marginalized identities. These identities coupled with her unfortunate homelife indicate that in a hierarchical system of hegemonic powers, Matilda is positioned as the lowest of the low. While outside of the fictionalized stage there would be considerations of race and class, as well as other identitarian and circumstantial realities, in the simplified world of the musical (which only really addresses gender and age explicitly), Matilda is an underdog, and she is willing to bite. Miss Trunchbull as a “male” adult seems to hold all the cards, and it is through disruptive resistance that justice is finally achieved. Matilda makes a striking revolutionary hero and her musical certainly feels revolutionary in its depiction of gender and age.

A REGRESSIVE PRACTICE

Forbidden Broadway’s satire of “Revolting Children” states that we live “in exploiting times [where] in every show they need a child” (00:02:53-00:02:055). There is a generality to the “exploiting times” and the unnamed “they” that unconsciously suggests larger institutional machinations. Alessandrini is certainly not alone in his cynicism. For the skeptic, the economic importance that Broadway appeal to broad groups results in entertainment that will never be progressive. Many may doubt the ability of any truly “subversive” material to get produced at all on the Great White Way. This may be overstating the case somewhat. I am inclined to agree with theatre scholar Susan Bennett who argues that “entertainment retail might be driven by its commitment to sell things, but that does not stop its producers from at least imagining that they can achieve an effect we have often

reserved for accounts of socially or politically motivated performance—changing the lives of audiences” (422). Moreover, I argue that the producers not only wish to achieve this effect but can and do change the lives of audiences. With no irony whatsoever, I place myself as one of these audience members who have felt irrevocably changed by experiencing Broadway shows or for-profit theatre in general. The much more compelling argument in critiquing Broadway as a neoliberal institution is not that audiences will leave with no change of heart, but that Broadway reproduces troubling power structures in the production of shows.

In the case of *Matilda*, this means that progressive potential exists in the text of the show which, while bland enough to be marketable, also has the ability to inspire positive change in the world. The revolutionary message of *Matilda* can trickle down to quotidian moments of empathy for women and children. This positive force, however, is mitigated somewhat by regressive practices in theatrical labor. It is precisely because the text of *Matilda* offers imaginative, revolutionary potentials that the production practices seem strikingly conservative.

The troubling practices that shaped *Matilda* can be drawn along the same lines as the revolutionary potentialities of the product: gender and age. While *Matilda* presents a world dominated by interesting women (the story of a young girl’s relationship with her mother, female teacher, and female headmistress), the creation of *Matilda* was dominated by men. It was difficult to find a vocal track on the cast album that soloed a male character, but it was also shockingly difficult to hunt down a woman practitioner on the creative team: Dennis Kelly is the playwright, Tim Minchin is the composer and lyricist, Matthew Warchus is the director, Chris Nightingale is the orchestrator, Peter Darling is the choreographer. The set design, costume design, effects design, lighting design, and sound design of the original production were all created by men. To belabor the point, both credited executive producers are also men (“Matilda). On the creative team of *Matilda*, women play the supporting roles. No one should diminish the very serious work of positions like associate choreographer or voice coach, but these positions don’t have the same influence over the end product and will not receive the same recognition as the more prestigious roles overwhelmingly filled by men. The lack of female advisement in the creation of *Matilda* is startlingly retrograde in a musical that strives to be forward thinking.

There are two primary reasons why the lack of female representation on the creative team seems troubling. First, in a musical that gives voice to the story of a little girl, the lack of a female perspective in the writing of the musical feels shortsighted. Theatre is a collaborative effort, and it is hard to know which cooks in the proverbial kitchen may have gone unnamed, despite contributing to the writing of the script. Still, particularly in a musical that discusses sexism, to have no female voice adding nuance to an understanding of a woman’s experience feels like an oversight.⁴ What this reflects is a system of power that privileges male creatives over female creatives even when a female artist may be more suited to the task, as could be argued in the case of *Matilda*.

The second reason this is troubling lies in the simple argument that the hiring of men deprives equally talented women from work and a paycheck. This ends up having a real effect on female theatre practitioners. In deciding to commission

4. For proof that women in the creative team make a difference in narrative storytelling, one only need look at the most recent musicals written by women as comparison: *Waitress*, *Fun Home*, etc. Moreover, principles of performance studies informed ontology suggest that the subject position of the author would *always* make a difference.

an all-male team, the RSC fell into the easy trap of hiring the same people who are always more likely to get hired. Whether or not this creative team did a good job, this practice is troubling and complicates the idea that *Matilda* is truly a feminist work or a revolutionary piece of theatre.

The other violent hierarchy that is addressed in the text of the play, that of age, also plays out in disturbing ways in the labor practices of the musical. As with the issue of gender, it is the space between the revolutionary text and the regressive practices that can be illuminating. There is a glaring contradiction between the construction of childhood inherent in the text of the musical and the implicit philosophy in the labor practices of the musical. The importance of playful freedom and revolt, a view of childhood that *Matilda the Musical* takes, is incongruous with the realities of being a child actor. These realities can be surprisingly difficult.

The presence of child actors onstage has continued to be economically feasible largely because the regulation for children on Broadway has remained relatively lax. New York law allows child actors, six to seventeen years old, to work for eight hours a day, with twelve-hour breaks between work, and an extra hour when school is not in session (New York State Dept of Labor). The lack of strict regulations ensures that the employment of children is financially viable since theatres do not need to extend rehearsal times to accommodate the child actors by much, if at all. Working eight hours a day, in and of itself, seems contradictory to a “revolting” childhood of freedom and exploration. In interviews with child actors and their caretakers, this becomes even more clear.

Theatrical work stresses discipline and professionalism from all its actors. Given children’s general lack of autonomy, the discipline demanded from performers on Broadway isn’t just expected, but imposed upon child actors. This is revealed in interviews and articles featuring “the Matildas.”⁵ As willing as they may be, child actors usually have their entire schedule overseen throughout the day by tutors, parents, and supervisors—that is, adults—to a micro-managerial degree.

In an interview, Elise Blake, one of the Matildas, described her daily schedule of getting up at 7:30 in the morning and going to bed at 11:00 at night with the carefully monitored work of school and performance taking up most of the intervening time (Williams). Georgia Pemberton, another Matilda, confirmed this schedule in an interview with Sally Williams, adding: “I don’t even turn the lights out [before going to sleep]. I don’t like it when you do a performance and have to get up for school the next day. I literally crawl out of bed.” The theme of feeling physically exhausted is repeated in some of the interviews as a glimpse of reality behind the endless positivity of fluff journalism. The physically demanding days are unsurprising to those familiar with Broadway practices but contradict the idealized childhood imagined in *Matilda* which clearly praises the freedom of kid-dom. In fact, the physical demands the children are expected to meet seem akin to the Trunchbull’s infamous “phys-ed” class. This isn’t to say that the creative team of *Matilda* are “Trunchbolls,” but it is clear that to make it in a Broadway musical as a child you have “to keep your feet inside the line,” both in the carefully timed choreography and in the more metaphorical sense of the phrase (Kelly and

5. *Matilda the Musical* has a rotating cast of children, typical for musicals that rely heavily on child actors. Three to four young child actresses become “the Matildas” for any one production of the musical and play the role on rotating nights.

Minchin). Revolution isn't a possibility for children in professional employ and this reinforces a hierarchy of age in which children can be exploited.

The "professionalism" that is often mentioned in interviews clearly refers to the children's strict observance of the rules and obedience to authority figures. Both interviewers and other actors often comment on the surprising amount of professionalism from the young actors. Jackie Castrey, the mother of a child actor, said that her child's work "brings about discipline: you can't mess about in the wings, you mustn't be late—all lessons that need to be learned in life" (Costa). These may be good lessons to learn in life, but they are a far cry from the rebellious spirit Tim Minchin, composer and lyricist of *Matilda*, imagined when he said in an interview with BBC that "we weren't going to let the... new age of parenting stop us [from] letting kids walk out feeling like adults are the enemies and the only way to vanquish the nasty grown-ups is to do tricks on them" (Sillito). Tim Minchin makes explicit reference to the violent system ("adults are the enemies") and wishes to encourage revolution; yet, the characters who revolt against The Trunchbull every night are not the child actors who dutifully perform the same choreography, arrive on time, and listen attentively every night.

This contradiction between the message of *Matilda* and the reality of producing *Matilda*, this disconnect between the text and the context, the character and the child actor, reveals the underpinnings of Broadway and the troubling operation of for-profit theatre. Professionalism is important in the theatre but expecting that professionalism is expected from children exposes how, while there are excitingly progressive messages in *Matilda*, Broadway continues to rely on exploitative labor practices that are distinctly anti-revolutionary.

The exploitation of the revolting child can illuminate a system in which all laborers are readily exploited. One of the basic premises of childhood studies is articulated best by Dr. Joseph M. Hawes, "childhood is where you catch a culture in high relief." (Russakoff). Just as gender difference in the creative team is highlighted by the fact that *Matilda* is a female story, the intersection between childhood studies and theatrical labor practices opens up an illuminated space. *Matilda the Musical* is one of the best vehicles in which to examine regressive ideologies in the practice of the Broadway musical because of the contradictions inherent between the textual messages and the labor practices at work.

In 2011, proposed legislation seeking further regulations for child actors came under intense fire for being too restrictive. The Broadway League, Actors Equity, Screen Actors Guild (SAG), and perhaps most tellingly, the Child Performers Coalition all opposed the legislation ("Government officials revising regulations for Broadway child actors"). The new legislation would have reduced the number of hours children aged 9-16 could work and required parents to obtain medical records declaring their children's ability to work (a law that was later passed). None of this sounds too unreasonable, but the prohibitive article of the proposed law prevented children under the age of eighteen from working past 10:00 at night, before most Broadway shows close, which posed obvious problems. More interesting than the opposition itself, which should have been expected, is the rhetoric used while battling the legislation: as Nancy Fox from SAG said, "you want to make sure New York is as user-friendly as possible" (Blain). In this context, the "user" Fox refers to here is the producers. Despite the tremendous social value that has been placed on children and childhood, legislation is geared around the needs of the producer. The ruling class once again holds the cards.

Broadway, as a commercial venture, has always been uniquely attuned to the producing authority, but as it faces increased corporatization, the stakes are getting higher (Wollman 446). While the typical theatre-goer likes to imagine a paternalistic relationship between employer and employee (school teacher and child), the realities of labor on Broadway are not nearly so idealistic, and the employers rarely so altruistic. *Matilda* highlights this gap. Furthermore, while capitalism usually relies on concealing the realities of labor, this is doubly true on Broadway which is “dependent in part on the successful promotion of a discourse about entertainment” (Clark 3). The producers of Broadway are more capable than ever, through financial means and corporate tie-ins, to control this discourse that allows for the contradiction in *Matilda* to stand, and also constrains the labor force of Broadway.

Part of this discourse is positioning acting as a “fun” occupation, particularly with child actors, which accounts for why children’s employment goes unquestioned. This, of course, has implications for all actors who often have the legitimacy of their work questioned and its worth devalued. The discourse of entertainment—both onstage and off—hides the physically and emotionally demanding labor of acting. Interviews with the stars of *Matilda* work to support this discourse, and the energy and exuberance of the *Matilda* cast onstage does little to suggest the labor and tedium of the production. In the end, all theatrical laborers are working in the same system; how children are presented and employed on Broadway sends a powerful message about what this institution accepts, and how women are positioned in leadership suggests the strides wider society has yet to make. While Broadway may produce musicals and plays that seem revolutionary, the practices of Broadway (and the world beyond) are often regressive in nature.

A framework that looks at both the text and context, product and practice, can help theatre practitioners reason through any theatrical production. I suspect that the ambivalence I describe here will be typical of most productions, particularly those on Broadway. This ambivalence is important as it gives room to consider theatre more holistically without ignoring either the theatre practitioner or the audience. Ben Brantley and Gerard Alessandrini are very different people, but both hit upon something in their discussions of this musical. While they may seem to say contradictory things, when we acknowledge that Brantley is observing a product and Alessandrini is critiquing a practice, both arguments can co-exist and complement each other. *Matilda the Musical* is revolutionary in its depictions of gender and age; it is regressive in its labor practices and traditions. By supporting both of these points, I hope that I have encouraged discussion between the two arguments, as the space in-between is where a potential for a more complete understanding exists.

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