Jenni Veitch Olson

"We Go Together": Nostalgia, Gender, Class, and the London Reception of *Grease: A New '50s Rock 'n' Roll Musical*

The British reception of *Grease: A New '50s Rock 'n' Roll Musical* in 1973 shows that cultural codes are anything but transatlantic or transparent. The depiction of masculinity, femininity, class conflict, and racial tension in the musical clashed with the British critics' and audiences' expectations for an American show and their memories of the decade that *Grease* evoked. The concept of "horizon of experience," coined by literary theorist Hans Jauss, describes a continuity of history that a work enters as it passes from simple reception to critical understanding, passive to active reception, and recognized aesthetic norms to new ones.[1] My evaluation of *Grease* suggests such a passage for this work. In other words, while earlier film musicals, including *Rebel Without a Cause* (1956), *West Side Story* (1958), *Hair* (1968), and *Godspell* (1971), addressed contemporary struggles about changing gender, class, and race relations from an American point of view, *Grease* appeared to advocate for a return to traditional social roles, falling short, in the eyes of Londoners at least, of their "horizon of experience" for an appropriately compelling work in the 1970s. Reception histories generally analyze successful performances and ignore failures; thus, evaluating a failure, such as that of *Grease* in London, confirms that cultural codes did not translate across the Atlantic. In short, the British backlash to a piece of American nostalgia reveals the complexities inherent it reception history.

Several scholars contributed to the foundation of this study. Sheridan Morley's extensive chronology of British musical theater history provides a point of departure.[2] Andrew Lamb has focused on the exchange of musical ideas between Britain and America and argued that during the post-World War II era England and the United States often shared ideas and themes even while America ultimately produced the more successful product.[3] Two recent studies examine other aspects of British musical theater:

John Snelson has assessed the development of a new style in the post-World War II years, while Ethan Mordden has asserted that in the seventies, American producers of musical theater used London's West End as a "practice run" for New York's Broadway. New works by John Bush Jones, David Walsh and Len Platt offer additional insights into American culture and musical theater: Bush Jones explores the American fascination with "recycled culture" and nostalgia, citing *Grease* and *Little Shop of Horrors* as prime examples; and Walsh and Platt explain the transformation of Broadway through the development of the rock musical, mainly *Hair*, *Godspell*, and *Grease*.[4]

This London reception study of *Grease* provides a new vantage point for musical theater scholarship. By drawing upon previous scholarship on musical theater, it examines transatlantic theater and cultural exchanges, concentrating on the under-explored British reception and especially the reception of failures. Compared to its 3,388 performances in New York City, *Grease* ran for 236 performances in London from 26 June 1973 to 16 February 1974, a short run for the time (see the appendix for a list of reviews consulted).[5]

On 14 February 1972, *Grease* burst onto the Broadway stage as another potentially exportable American success and achieved record-breaking status in its home country. First produced at Eden Theater, the off-Broadway show moved uptown to the Broadhurst Theater after running less than four months. *Grease* earned seven Tony Award nominations in 1972, including Best Musical and Best Book (Musical), but traditional critics unsympathetic to the inroads of rock music in general, refused to acknowledge its popularity at first. *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* received all the top honors. But in the *New York Times*, Harris Green credited the musical with managing "to combine the two commodities everyone agrees our theater most requires: younger audiences and what I can best describe—not too ponderously—as 'older virtues.'"[6]

Set in a fifties American high school, *Grease* narrates a conventional love story of the tough yet cool "masculine" Danny Zuko and the clean "feminine" Sandy Dumbrowski. Sandy's unexpected transfer to Danny's school complicates their innocent summer romance and prompts his double talking and double acting to sustain his tough guy image. Danny misses a date with Sandy to the school prom, and so she leaves him "Alone at the Drive-In Movie." They reunite when Sandy trades her clean, proper, and feminine image for the trappings—leather jacket, hoop earrings, and a cigarette—of a bad girl. The musical numbers offer a clever sampling of rock 'n' roll tropes, including "Summer Nights," the romantic love song; "Greased Lightnin'," the oversexualized, masculinized rock beat; "We Go Together," the happy, everything-will-turn-out-alright chorus; and "Beauty School Dropout," with its dreamy male-saves-female address.

By offering a nostalgic escape from social restraints of the time, *Grease* appealed to the American musical viewers the authors intended. In a *Time*

interview, Jim Jacobs, the musical's coauthor and a self-proclaimed "greaser," stated that he conceived the musical as a celebration of a dull but peaceful era, "when the only thing kids knew about the President was that he played golf and had trouble with his intestines, and the biggest tragedy in life was if you didn't get your dad's car for the drive-in."[7] Jacobs and Warren Casey, the coauthor, attended high school in the 1950s, establishing their supposed understanding of "greasers" and rock 'n' roll. After first meeting in Chicago in 1963, they began writing *Grease* in the early seventies as a "modest, inexpensive show that would take an affectionate but honest look at the world of their youth."[8] Ironically, Jacob and Casey's "honest look" at their high school years included only partially accurate gender roles and none of the class or racial conflicts of the fifties. Although Jim Jacobs and Warren Casey claimed to have written a mild parody of the days of sock hops, proms, poodle skirts, drive-ins, ducktails, and "going steady," the musical actually rewrites the negative aspects of fifties high school history, thus creating a sweeter, cleaner, and sanitized "new '50s" as the title implies. In supposedly poking fun at the decade, Jacobs and Casey in fact ignored the realities of history. Casey explained the audience's reaction to *Grease*, "They can identify with it all. They are astonished that this is the past already."[9] In fact, it barely happened at all as they tell it.

Underneath the sugarcoated nostalgia of *Grease* hide the realities of post-World War II American gender roles, in particular women's roles. Women's historian Ruth Rosen describes the fifties as the decade that "Quarantined dissent and oozed conformity . It was as though someone had banished poverty, prejudice and pain from public culture."[10] Experts encouraged white women to embrace domesticity in service to their nation with the same spirit that they had aided their country by taking wartime jobs. According to historian Elaine Tyler May, female domesticity adapted after World War II to professionalize homemaking for the atomic age and Cold War.[11] Prescriptive advice to suburban women reinforced notions that gaining true happiness meant supporting one's husband as a housewife, and violating these roles would cause sexual and familial chaos, thus weakening the country's moral fiber.

The flux of sexual values for women and men further complicated gender roles during the postwar years. The fifties marked widespread acceptance of "sexual liberalism" including tolerance for noncoital forms of premarital sex, a heightened expectation for erotic fulfillment in marriage, and an explosion of sexual images in the media, as Elaine Tyler May suggests. Concurrently, she notes, taboos against premarital intercourse, homosexuality, and other forms of nonprocreative sex remained central tenets of sexual morality.[12] Perpetuating a double standard, the same culture that increasingly exploited sex for product promotion still insisted on apparent virginal innocence in its girls and sexual fidelity in its women. Guilt combined with the stigma of "promiscuity" caused women to think twice about premarital sexual activity. A woman's reputation was inextricably linked to her sexual behavior so that fear of pregnancy or of public

opinion often inhibited activity.[13] The fifties reinforced traditional gender roles that were oppressive for women and men.

These traditional and even dichotomous gender roles define the main characters in *Grease*: Sandy, Danny, Rizzo, and Kenickie. With sexual innocence and feminine propriety as the basis of Sandy Dumbrowski's character, she confirms this image in her reprise, "Look at me, there has to be something more than what they see/ Wholesome and pure also scared and unsure, a poor man's Sandra Dee."[14] Sandy's name "Dumbrowski" suggests both "dumb blonde" and "dumb Polish" jokes. In a *New York Times* review, Harris Green states of Sandy, "the awesome purity of the heroine should be restorative enough for anyone overwhelmed by the lack of morality of the other girls."[15] Yet she sheds her Sandra Dee surface and apparently her chastity to win her working-class, tough-guy Danny's heart. But Sandy seemingly transforms herself from "good girl" into "bad girl" without consequences that, while suggesting the performative nature of gender and class, utterly erases fifties realities, including the guilt and stigma of promiscuity associated with premarital sexual activity and the lower-class status of the "bad girl." With respect to fifties gender roles, Sandy plays her supportive, submissive role beautifully but escapes punishment.

Sandy's beau, Danny Zuko, typifies the cool "greaser" of the fifties high school working class, but he is a stereotype. As an attempt to ensure acceptance by an in-crowd (the T-Birds), Danny exaggerates the details of his summer romance and finds himself caught between the gang and the pure Sandy. Re-channeling his sexual energy, Danny letters in track, hoping that his conformity to her middle-class Horatio Alger expectation will win her heart. Despite originally shunning the higher caste high school boys, Danny easily and successfully transforms himself into acceptability and moves on up, despite a name and background lacking a WASP pedigree (Zuko could be Polish or Italian, but is clearly not English or Irish).

While Sandy, the female lead role, embodies the ideal "good" girls in society, Betty Rizzo, the female supporting role, typifies the "bad" girls. In her study of *Oklahoma!*, musicologist Susan Cook asserts that American musical theater relies on the high-class virgin and low-class whore as conventional characters. Similar to Ado Annie, Rizzo's role follows the pattern of orthodox, sexual, low-class, secondary character female.[16] In *Grease*, the stigma of her promiscuity and feared pregnancy distinguishes Rizzo as the sexual female, exemplified in her lament, "I could hurt someone like me" from "There are Worse Things I Could Do."[17] Further complicating the sexual female role, Americans in the 1950s began to accept birth control (via condoms and diaphragms and *coitus interruptus* before the invention of the birth-control pill in 1960) as a means of improving marital sex and family planning. This was great for good girls (i.e., married or about to be married), of course, but dangerous for its potential for liberating sex outside of marriage.[18] Bad girls found to be pregnant often faced unpleasant alternatives: secrecy, exile from home and family, illegal abortion. Women in similar situations to Rizzo faced guilt and potential disgrace in society

as a consequence of their "bad girl" behavior, yet in *Grease* Rizzo suffers only mild consequences as she continues to act up.

A double standard is also applied with Kenickie, a male who is expected to find sex with bad girls, but not be punished for it. As Danny's closest greaser pal, Kenickie gains sexual experience as a rite of passage to his kind of manhood. The oversexualized "Greased Lightnin'" reaffirms society's acceptance of male sexual license as a given. When Kenickie sings, "Ya know without a doubt, I'll be really makin' out in Greased Lightnin',"[19] we understand him perfectly. According to family historian Stephanie Coontz, in sharp contrast to the nineteenth century, when Anglo-American society considered "oversexed" or demanding men to have serious problems, the fifties considered sexually aggressive men "normal" or "natural." Men no longer felt any the responsibility to save themselves for marriage or even protect a presumably innocent female. Such conscientiousness was deemed exclusively a woman's responsibility.[20] Rizzo's fear of pregnancy barely affects Kenickie who immediately recommends an abortion if necessary. As society excuses Kenickie's sexual appetite, it shuns Rizzo as a bad girl, the bad girl that Sandy, ironically, wishes to become in order to complete her love story.

The conventional characters in *Grease* all meet the expectations an American audience could have for melodrama. Stereotypical characters abound and exhibit exaggerated conflicts of vice and virtue.[21] Theater historians David Walsh and Len Platt note how melodrama expresses the moral conventions of its own time, and such expressions are certainly at issue in *Grease*.[22] The plot emphasizes individuality and pubescent trauma as threshold to vice for American youth growing up in the 1950s. Conformity to community standards and striving for romantic ideals, on the other hand, are presented as virtue. Sandy, Danny, Rizzo, and Kenickie triumph over high school culture throughout the musical's predictable storyline. Furthermore, *Grease* confirms a set of received but questionable standards with respect to gender, class, and race. Although the tone of melodrama is often sentimental, the tone of *Grease* seems wistful. Such evocations bespeak the presence of nostalgia. In the words of social historians Douglas Miller and Marion Nowak:

> Periods of intense longing for an earlier era indicate that people are discontented with the present. Excessive, sentimental nostalgia generally occurs during times of perceived crisis. The rise of fifties enthusiasm [in the 1970s] coincided with widespread disillusionment and a growing conservatism. For many people the 1950s came to symbolize a golden age of innocence and simplicity, an era supposedly unruffled by riots, racial violence, Vietnam, Watergate and assassinations.

Several American reviews celebrated the nostalgia that *Grease* evoked. *Newsweek*'s Jack Kroll, for example, chided, "No country loves lost inno-

cence like America."[24] By the early seventies, Americans greeted the fifties as the next source of nostalgia, and *Grease* transported audiences to the seemingly innocent high school days they thought they remembered. As John Bush Jones notes, Americans were so disenchanted with the present that they retreated to the fifties again and again.[25] The overwhelming success of *Grease* demonstrates this disillusionment: the instant fame for the 1978 film version of *Grease* with John Travolta and Olivia Newton John, and an American *Grease* revival in 1994 that became the longest running Broadway revival in theater history.[26]

While America embraced the nostalgia of *Grease* as a thematic notion, England pushed it aside, looking for different ideas. Since World War II, American musical products came to dominate the transatlantic musical theater, leaving British artists either to compete with the new American product or meet the residual demand for more traditional shows. England produced some isolated local successes in the postwar years, but from the 1940s to the 1970s only *Oliver!* (1960), *Stop the World—I Want to Get Off* (1961), and *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1971) challenged the sensational success of American productions in America. Back in England, according to musical theater historian John Snelson, after World War II, British musical theater writers ignored recent international transformations in an attempt to continue unchanged, while American writers adapted to a changed world that could never be the same.[27]

The arrival in Britain of *Oklahoma!* and *Annie Get Your Gun* both in 1947 created the sense of an "American invasion" in London; suddenly "modern" musicals from America were forcing out traditional British shows. These American musicals featured almost exclusively young and spirited American casts, presenting nostalgic pictures of prewar life.[28] English musicals reinforced her "old-fashioned" spirit by presenting exclusively British concerns of the time. *Bless the Bride* (1947) capitalized on Victorian costumes and imagery of its period setting, adopted a Gilbert and Sullivan musical idiom, and concentrated on the relationship between England and France at the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War. In short, the shows evoked times and places firmly associated with operetta. *King's Rhapsody* and *Her Excellency* from 1949 addressed postwar recovery and rationing experiences, but did so in a context not easily understood outside Britain. The distinctly British mood, created by social and political dimensions, alienated American Broadway audiences.[29]

Although many British musicals seemed old-fashioned compared to their American counterparts, the British show *Golden City* (1950) adapted American models in an attempt to change the existing style. Set in the early twentieth century, *Golden City* essentially copied *Oklahoma!* to suit the different cultural resonances of the London audience. In place of the Oklahoman frontier was that of South Africa with opposing groups of farmers and miners instead of farmers and cowboys. Despite such obvious borrowings, British musicals as a whole proved unable to produce the fusion of dramatic, musical, and directorial vision that in those same years

made the American musicals *Oklahoma!*, *Annie Get Your Gun*, *West Side Story* (1957), and *My Fair Lady* (1956) such compelling and highly exportable commodities.

By the late sixties and early seventies, the contemporary gender, class, and race issues resonated with British audiences in the American musicals *Hair* (1968) and *Godspell* (1971). *Hair*, an instant success in London in 1968, celebrated the preoccupations of the make-love-not-war generation of the American 1960s, partly because European students were experiencing some of the same turmoil, though owing to slightly different causes. In contrast to *Grease* and its overwhelming rose-colored nostalgia, *Hair* presents contemporary social concerns through then current rock musical style idioms, still heavily indebted to the British rock invasion. *Hair* identified the attitudes and emotions of an emerging youth culture during a period of international turmoil. Among the musical's characters, the British witnessed the social freedoms they desired and reviewers praised the production: "its honesty and passion give it the quality of a true theatrical celebration—the joyous sound of a group of people telling the world exactly what they feel."[30] British audiences appreciated challenges to traditionally configured gender and class roles, despite their questionable historicity.

With similar contemporary social concerns, the 1971 production of *Godspell* resounded with British audiences. Based on the Gospel of Matthew, *Godspell* featured a Jesus in a Superman T-shirt and nine other multiracial followers who act out parables, play assorted apostles, and interact with an unsuspecting audience. In this version of the Biblical story, Jesus's casting directors do not discriminate on the basis of gender or race. Although "Turn Back, O Man," the Mae West number, acknowledges the conventional, sexual female role, the smaller cast size and absence of specific characters blurred the familiar "bad girl" role as the plot similarly eschewed romance. The musical offers Jesus Christ and His love as the idealistic solution for personal life problems.[31] While *Godspell* cleverly dresses a familiar religious icon in hip casual clothing to facilitate "identification" for young audiences, *Grease* relies on an unsubtle retelling of more recent history as an escape. *Grease* seemed to promote social regression in London during a time when social progress seemed imminent.

Both *Hair* and *Godspell* reinforced the division and transition within the British audiences. As British theater historian Arthur Marwick suggests, by 1965 different audiences emerged for various theater productions as a new norm. Appealing to a broader range of theatergoers, musicals, thrillers, and light comedies found financial success with the changing audiences.[32] *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1971) introduced London to Andrew Lloyd Webber, the English musical theater visionary who revived the West End through blockbuster musicals such as *Cats*.[33] Although originally the staple at British theaters, plays aimed at commercial success with the predominantly middle class and upper class audiences struggled through the late sixties and seventies.

In addition to new developments in musical theater, rising youth move-

ments in the fifties and sixties complicated the negative British reception of *Grease*. Rebellious teens in the fifties organized as the teddy boys gang, resulting in a youth culture movement associated with the new styles of American film and music. As British historian Bill Osgerby explains, the teddy boys built a framework for young, unskilled workers who had money to spend, as evidenced in their dress code and lifestyle, even in an era of unemployment.[34] The moniker "teddy boys" derived from their clothing style, dating back to the Edwardian era (1901–1910): the long-line drape jacket often with a velvet collar and slim line trousers.

A focal point in *Grease*, the quiff or ducktail hairstyle completed the teddy boys' appearance. Joseph Connolly, a British popular culture historian, claims that an English East End hairdresser known simply as Mr. Rose invented this popular style as early as 1954.[35] The lexicographer Jonathon Green identifies the "greaser" character as a fifties teddy boy with his hair slicked back with Brylcreem or a similar product.[36] Several other lexicographies date the appearance of the term "greaser" to the fifties as a derogatory name for English teddy boys and then applied to rockers in the sixties.[37] The name "greaser" originated in England and traveled to America where fifties youth embraced the name as their own.

Initially, the name "teddy boys" carried affection, but involvement of youth in street crime, gang rivalry, and juvenile delinquency tainted the term. In September 1956, screenings of *Rock Around the Clock* spurred a series of disturbances by youth throughout London, causing "the Teddy Boy problem" as the *London Times* identified it.[38] Racist attacks in Nottingham and Nottingham Hill in 1958 also singled out the teddy boys as a public threat to England.[39] Although the teddy boys style attracted only a small minority of London youth, their image of toughness and attachment to American musical and film culture made them the first real youth movement of the century.[40]

The teddy boys' popularity faded as two other working class youth movements, the rockers and the mods ("moderns" or "modernists"), arose. According to Osgerby, the rockers' image of sturdy masculinity derived from their leather jackets, jeans, boots, and motorcycles.[41] The Beatles owed their allegiance to the rockers, the group that listened to American rock 'n' roll and skiffle music. Beatles' historian John Muncie identifies John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison, and Ringo Starr as "always rockers and never mods."[42] In contrast to the rockers and teddy boys, the mods created a cult of smartness and cool sophistication. Despite their working class roots, the mods implied a classless affluence of teenagers as a symbol of British prosperity. Furthermore, the mods helped define "Swinging London" in the sixties and remained popular into the seventies, as Bill Osgerby notes. At the close of the sixties, a British prosperity that favored teenagers crumbled in the face of economic crisis resulting in increasingly negative views of youth by the next decade.[43] Beginning in 1970, political and economic pessimism elevated throughout England, reaching a climax during the severe recession of 1972.[44] *Grease* in 1973 arrived in an

England not yet prepared to romanticize the relatively recent disruptiveness of youth gangs.

As the rockers and mods reshaped the youth movements, the second-wave Women's Movement transformed sexual politics in seventies England. The prevailing commercial marketing image, at the end of the sixties, based on a white, middle-class, male London as a singular national culture seemed oblivious to gender and racial issues.[45] The publication of several feminist texts, including Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970), Eva Figes's *Patriarchal Attitudes* (1970), and Juliet Mitchell's *Woman's Estate* (1971), challenged orthodoxies in an effort to reformulate traditional patriarchal conceptions of British culture. Throughout the seventies, British women demanded a politicized feminist voice similar to the American women's voice of the previous decade. Theater critic Irving Wardle recognized the women's cries when he observed that *Grease* shows "That male supremacy is as strong as ever."[46]

In the midst of threats to the cultural status quo, the British viewed Jim Jacobs and Warren Casey's rewritten fifties high school history in *Grease* as problematic and inaccurate, especially as compared to motion pictures and musicals actually made in the fifties, such as *Rebel Without A Cause* and *West Side Story*. The idyllic past that *Grease* invoked excluded the gang violence, class, and racial tensions present in other productions, as the *London Times*' critic Irving Wardle cites:

> The atmosphere of Rydell High is no less horrendous than that of the schools in *Blackboard Jungle* and *Rebel Without A Cause*. But, unlike those actual fifties documents, *Grease* excludes all real violence or serious consequences. Perhaps the squares did get on, and the others finished up as scrubbers and garage hands: never mind, they are still encapsulated in their charmed world where all that counts is getting along with the gang.[47]

Wardle writing in 1973 distinguishes the films *Blackboard Jungle* (1955) and *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) as realistic representations of the fifties that explored the realities of class and to a lesser extent racial conflicts in high school culture. The original English critics of the 1950s agreed.

In 1973, however, the London reception of *Grease* reflected a backlash against American fifties nostalgia, and a dissatisfaction with the sanitized, rewritten decade it displayed. Staged at the New London Theatre, the production featured Richard Gere as Danny Zuko and Stacey Gregg as Sandy Dumbrowski, performers from the touring Broadway cast, and Jacquie-Ann Carter, a British actress in the role of Betty Rizzo. Irving Wardle's initial *London Times* review carried the headline, "Concentrated style in rock fairy-tale parody on the primeval fifties," clearly signaling the reviewer's disdain with the musical and its questionable historical basis.[48] The phrase "rock fairy-tale parody" assumes a reliance on rock 'n' roll tropes and a misleading make-believe storyline; and the phrase "primeval

fifties" suggests an earlier, simpler time, absent from the decade entirely. Wardle proceeds to reveal further inaccuracies:

> What [*Grease*] records is the birth of teenage pop culture: absolute subservience to gang convention, and the near-farcical split between the triviality of the kids' preoccupations and the frenzy of the music in which they expressed them.[49]

Both the *New Statesman* and the *Financial Times* criticized the period setting of the musical, with the latter referring to it as, "the nadir of popular entertainment" and "the lowest level of current [high school] behavior."[50] In contrast to Americans' nostalgic response to the show, these reviews demonstrate a British disgust with it and the fifties in general. Michael Billington, in the *Manchester Guardian*, echoed his opposition to the *Grease* nostalgia:

> My one qualm is that we are all becoming hung-up on nostalgia, even the young So avid are we for nostalgia, so disillusioned with the present that we have even turned the fifties into a vanished golden age.[51]

Although the musical received widespread criticism, most British reviews credited *Grease* with at least correctly capturing the surface of a bygone era, in music, fashion, and hairstyles.[52]

The film version of *Grease* succeeded commercially, but critics again identified the same problems as they had in the staged musical. In 1978, Alan Brien's *Sunday Times* review of *Grease: The Movie* maintained, "Producer Robert Stigwood has prefabricated in *Grease* a bogus, clumsily-jointed, pastiche of late-Fifties-style high school musical, studded with leftovers from *West Side Story* and *Rebel Without a Cause*."[53] Jan Dawson's scathing review in the *British Film Institute's Monthly Film Bulletin* scolds the film:

> Even in the days of blanket nostalgia, when cinema fashions have all but eclipsed the present tense, *Grease* arguably achieves a new low in retro styles. Spiritual homesickness for a vanished past (real or imagined) is usually despairing enough; but the loving recreation of a style perceived as hideous appears (like the sentimental hindsight on a state of innocence defined as calculated and corrupt) to mark something of a perverse first in backward-looking movies. Not that the Fifties of Randall Kleiser's *Grease* is—or even was—a specifically locatable historic era. It is a compound of motley artifacts, styles, rhythms, sounds and movie references, bound together by the fact that they are alike perceived, with quite remarkable—and self-congratulatory—condescension, through the wrong end of a telescope.[54]

Although Casey and Jacobs intended to parody the fifties in *Grease*, the British seemingly found nothing comical about the musical, and professed to pity any who claimed to enjoy the nostalgic escape.

The British backlash against American fifties nostalgia extended beyond the theater, most notably to the film *American Graffiti* in 1974. Although director George Lucas set the film in 1962, reviews criticized his idyllic 1960s as, "undefined" and, as the *London Times* noted:

> There is a vaguely more of the fifties about it than of the early sixties, with the James Dean look of the more delinquent youths and the extensive but only loosely evocative selection of the music of Bill Haley, et al Perhaps Lucas's memories are overtly coloured by old films.[55]

Similar to the film and theater reviews of *Grease*, critics questioned the historical accuracy in *American Graffiti*, as the *BFI Monthly Film Bulletin* stated, "Lucas's direct inspiration seems to be comic strips."[56] All the conflicts and problems of the characters in *American Graffiti* vanish at the end of the film without any long-term consequence.

Grease celebrated a high school culture of the fifties that was unintelligible to English audiences even in the 1950s. As British social historian Joseph Connolly argues, English high school students in the fifties wanted to be Americans because, "Everything seemed so much easier in America—kids over there all seemed to have a lot of time and money and clothes and opportunities."[57] *Grease* represented the prosperity of American teenagers and the desires of British teens, unable to drive nice cars, have some spending money, or live in an integrated male and female society. It appeared to British teenagers that America encouraged promiscuous relationships among young males and females through high school proms and drive-in dates. In contrast, many if not most English high schools remained single sex, and very few British teens had access to cars for drive-in movie dating.[58]

Whereas fifties nostalgia appealed to Americans through *Grease*, the mods and sixties nostalgia seem a more appropriate subject for a British musical in the seventies. Looking for theater popularity in London, a sensitive composer might better have transformed Sandy into a sixties mod rather than a greaser girlfriend. Although the greaser image afforded Sandy "progressive" sexual freedoms, the teddy boy image had become passé in London. Both the teddy boys and the mods took part in rock 'n' roll groups, such as the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Who, and the Kinks, and fostered changing concepts of the working class in sixties London. By 1973, young men and women of the London working class (if they were in fact employed) were seeking the sexual freedoms of its new mod status, not its teddy boys' predecessor as modeled in *Grease* by the T-Birds.

Grease closes with the musical number "We Go Together." This chorus registers ironically, since the musical failed to meet Londoners' "horizon

of experience" in the seventies. The British chose not to escape to the fifties nostalgia of *Grease* or to forget their contemporary struggles as their American counterparts seemed to have done. The musical merely confirmed recognized American rock 'n' roll clichés, already familiar to English listeners, but added insult to injury by presenting clearly unhistorical gender and class relationships. While *Hair* and *Godspell* helped create new British aesthetic norms for musical genre, dramatic content, and freedom from censorship,[59] *Grease* offered no such challenge. A stage revival in 1978 did no better. Even by 1978, following the success of Olivia Newton John and John Travolta's *Grease* film adaptation, a new London staging failed to appeal.

In its 1993 revival, *Grease* finally received British support, and the musical enjoyed more than a six-year run in the West End. Interestingly, the American Broadway revival of *Grease* in 1994 followed the London success. Some new music was added, but more importantly, during the two intervening decades, the audience had changed. Younger audiences, with heightened tolerance for sanitized fifties nostalgia (owing mostly to their lack of direct experience with any period before 1980) found a new "horizon." In the seventies, the British preferred more realistic renderings of the fifties from *Rebel Without a Cause* and *West Side Story*. By the nineties, nostalgia's powerful amnesia persuaded them with power that nobody, not even the British, could avoid.

Notes

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4. John Snelson, "British Musical Theatre, 1935–1960," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 118. Ethan Mordden, *One More Kiss* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2003), 170; John Bush Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 2003), 305; David Walsh and Len Platt, *Musical Theater and American Culture* (Westport: Praeger, 2003), 147. Despite addressing relations between England and America, these volumes do not explore reception histories or productions that fail.
5. Kurt Gänzl, *The British Musical Theatre* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 965.
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7. *Time*, "True *Grease*" review of *Grease: A New '50s Rock 'n Roll Musical*, by Jim Jacobs and Warren Casey, directed by Tom Moore, Broadhurst Theater, New York, 29 May 29 1972, 56.
8. Stanley Green, *The World of Musical Comedy*, 4th ed. (San Diego: A.S. Barnes & Co., 1980), 366.
9. *Time*, "True."

10. Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Penguin, 2001), 8.

11. Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1988), 103.

12. May, *Homeward*, 116.

13. Ibid., 123.

14. Jim Jacobs and Warren Casey, *Grease: A New '50s Rock 'n' Roll Musical* (New York: Edwin H. Morris & Company, 1981), 160-161.

15. Green, "'Grease?'," *New York Times*.

16. I thank Susan Cook for allowing me to use this insightful unpublished paper. Susan C. Cook, "'Pretty Like the Girl': Gendering Character and Musicking Gender in *Oklahoma!*," 19.

17. Jacobs and Casey, *Grease*, 158.

18. May, *Homeward*, 153.

19. Jacobs and Casey, *Grease*, 53.

20. Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 40.

21. This broader definition of "melodrama" comes from the second entry in *Webster's New World Collegiate Dictionary, 4th Edition* (Cleveland: Wiley Publishing, 2002): "now, a drama as a play or film, concerned with exaggerated conflicts and emotions, stereotyped characters, etc." Peter Branscombe's *Grove Online* explanation continues, "'melodrama' is also used in a less specifically musical sense to denote a kind of play, particularly popular in the 19th century (more commonly without a musical accompaniment) in which romantic and frequently sensational happenings that follow certain conventions are carried through until at the end Good triumphs and Evil is frustrated." Peter Branscombe, "Melodrama," *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (http:www.grovemusic.com). See also Anne Dhu Shapiro's "Melodrama" entry in *Grove Opera Online*.

22. Walsh and Platt, *Musical Theater*, 30. The authors also credit the predictable form of melodrama as one of the genre's legitimizing factors in the theater of America. Requiring only a small number of actors, melodrama succeeded on small resources from permanent stock companies.

23. Douglas Miller and Marion Nowak, *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), 5.

24. Jack Kroll, "Before 'Hair,'" review of *Grease: A New '50s Rock 'n' Roll Musical*, by Jim Jacobs and Warren Casey, directed by Tom Moore, Broadhurst Theater, New York *Newsweek*, 28 February 1972, 95.

25. Bush Jones, *Our Musicals*, 312.

26. *Grease* closed in April 1980 after nearly eight years, and topped the records of *My Fair Lady, Hello, Dolly!*, and *Fiddler on the Roof*. Kurt Gänzl, *The Encyclopedia of Musical Theatre*, 2nd ed. (New York: Schirmer Books, 2001), 812.

27. Snelson, *Cambridge Companion*, 118.

28. Ibid., 107.

29. Ibid., 119.

30. Irving Wardle, "Plenty to Alarm Unwary in Hymn to Freedom" review of *Hair*, by Galt MacDermot, directed by Tom O'Horgam, Shaftesbury Theatre, *London Times*, 28 September 1968.

31. Stephen Schwartz uses flower children and rock music as a context for the larger message of Christianity, beginning with the metaphorical title meaning "God's spell." Walsh and Platt interpret *Godspell* as Schwartz's contemporary message of Christianity, offering a "conversion" experience, including sacraments, through the musical theater medium (see *Musical Theater*, 148–50).

32. Arthur Marwick, *Culture in Britain Since 1945* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 117.

33. For a discussion of Lloyd Webber's influence in England and America see Lamb, *150 Years of Popular Musical Theatre*.

34. Bill Osgerby, *Images of Youth: Popular Culture as Educational Ideology*, ed. Michael A. Oliker and Walter P. Krolikowski, S.J. (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 140.

35. Joseph Connolly, *"All Shook Up": A Flash of the Fifties* (London: Cassell & Co., 2000), 62.

36. Jonathon Green, *The Cassell Dictionary of Slang* (London: Cassell, 1998), 494.

37. Tony Thorne states that "greaser" was a scathing term adopted by the mods and students to refer to rockers in 1964. Tony Thorne, *Dictionary of Contemporary Slang* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997), 267. See also Paul Beale, ed. *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, 8th Ed. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 472.

38. *London Times*, "'Rock and Roll' Disturbances" review of *Rock Around the Clock*, directed by Richard Brooks, 4 September 1956.

39. Osgerby, *Images*, 140 and Connolly, *"All,"* 60.

40. Jerry White, *London in the Twentieth Century* (London: Viking, 2001), 325.

41. Bill Osgerby, *Youth in Britain Since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 43.

42. For a discussion of the Beatles and British youth culture from the teddy boys to the skinheads, see John Muncie, "The Beatles and the Spectacle of Youth" in *The Beatles, Popular Music and Society* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 39.

43. Osgerby, *Youth*, 43–4.

44. White, *London*, 387.

45. Moore-Gilbert, *The Arts*, 8–9.

46. Irving Wardle, "Concentrated Style in Rock Fairy-tale Parody of the Primeval Fifties" review of *Grease: A New '50s Rock 'n' Roll Musical*, by Jim Jacobs and Warren Casey, directed by Tom Moore, New London Theatre, *London Times*, 27 June 1973.

47. Wardle, "Concentrated," *London Times*.

48. Ibid.

49. Ibid.

50. Benedict Nightingale, "Jed-Propelled" review of *Grease: A New '50s Rock 'n' Roll Musical*, by Jim Jacobs and Warren Casey, directed by Tom Moore, New London Theatre, London, *New Statesman*, 6 July 1973. B.A. Young, review of *Grease: A New '50s Rock 'n' Roll Musical*, by Jim Jacobs and Warren Casey, directed by Tom Moore, New London Theatre, London, *Financial Times,* 27 June 1973.

51. Michael Billington, review of *Grease: A New '50s Rock 'n' Roll Musical*, by Jim Jacobs and Warren Casey, directed by Tom Moore, New London Theatre, London, *Manchester Guardian*, 27 June 1973.

52. Kingston, *Punch*.

53. Alan Brien, "Travolta: Centaur Among the Co-Eds" review of *Grease: The Movie*, directed by Robert Stigwood, *Sunday Times,* 17 September 1978.

54. Jan Dawson, review of *Grease: The Movie*, directed by Robert Stigwood, *BFI: Monthly Film Bulletin,* September 1978, 176. I thank the reference room librarians at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Memorial Library for their assistance in locating British reviews of American films.

55. David Robinson, review of *American Graffiti*, directed by George Lucas, *London Times*, 29 March 1974.

56. Richard Combs, review of *American Graffiti*, directed by George Lucas, *BFI: Monthly Film Bulletin*, February 1974.

57. Connolly, *'All,'* 79.

58. Ibid., 76–7.

59. In 1967, the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Censorship lifted the 1843 Theatres Act that required Lord Chamberlain to license productions. The new law went into effect on 26 September 1968 and *Hair* opened with full-frontal nudity on stage on 27 September 1968. James Verner, the show's producer, was willing to wait as long as possible for the censorship to be lifted. Dominic Shellard, *British Theatre Since the War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 146–7.

Appendix

Although not a comprehensive list of reviews for these musicals and films, the following is a selection of ones examined in this study and available to me in 2004.

American Graffiti

Combs, Richard, "American Graffiti." *BFI/Monthly Film Bulletin* 41 (1974): 23.
Dawson, Jan, "American Graffiti." *Sight and Sound* 44 (1974): 116.
Robinson, David, "Richard Lester Recovers the Knack." *London Times*, 29 March 1974.
"The Arts." *Sunday Times*, 31 March 1974.

Godspell

Wardle, Irving, "Godspell." *London Times*, 18 November 1971.

Grease: A New '50s Rock 'n' Roll Musical

Barnes, Clive, "Theater: 'Grease,' 1959 as Nostalgia." *New York Times*, 15 February 1972.
Billington, Michael, "Grease at the New London." *Manchester Guardian*, 27 June 1973.
Green, Harris, "'Grease?' Groovy." *New York Times*, 4 July 1972.
Kerr, Walter, "You Tell Me Your Dream . No, Don't!" *New York Times*, 27 February 1972.
Kingston, Jeremy, "Theatre." *Punch*, 4 July 1973.
Kroll, Jack, "Before 'Hair.'" *Newsweek*, 28 February 1972.
Nightingale, Benedict, "Jed-Propelled." *New Statesman*, 6 July 1973.
Oliver, Edith, "The Theatre: Off-Broadway." *New Yorker*, 26 February 1972.
"True 'Grease.'" *Time*, 29 May 1972.
Terwin, J.C., "A Time to Laugh." *Illustrated London News*, September 1973.
Wardle, Irving, "Concentrated Style in Rock Fairy-Tale Parody of Primeval Fifties." *London Times*, 27 June 1973.
Watt, Douglas, "'Grease' a Rollicking Musical, Salutes the Rock 'n' Roll Era." *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews*, 1972.
Young, B.A., "Grease." *Financial Times*, 27 June 1973.

Grease: The Movie

Brien, Alan, "Travolta: Centaur Among Co-eds." *Sunday Times*, 17 September 1978.
Dawson, Jan, "Grease." *BFI/Monthly Film Bulletin* 45 (1978): 175.
Robinson, David, "A Week of Parody, Pastiche and Talented Girls." *London Times*, 15 September 1978.

Hair

Wardle, Irving, "Plenty to Alarm Unwary in Hymn to Freedom." *London Times*, 28 September 1968.

Rebel Without a Cause

Dent, Alan, "Delinquents All. *The Illustrated London News*, 4 February 1956.
"Rebel Without A Cause. *London Times*, 23 January 1956.

Rock Around the Clock

"Rock Around the Clock." *London Times*, 23 July 1956.
London Times, 4–17 September 1956.

West Side Story

Keown, Eric, "At the Play." *Punch*, 24 December 1958.
"Musical Turns Tragedy." *London Times*, 13 December 1958.
Terwin, J.C., "The Gangs and the Gods." *The Illustrated London News*, 27 December 1958.
Worsley, T.C., "I Bite My Thumb, Sir." *New Statesman*, 20 December 1958.