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'1950's America; When The Stars Shined the Brightest.'

The effects of musical films on society in America during the 1950's.

**Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
Bachelor of Arts Degree. (Film, Literature and Drama.)**

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ABSTRACT

I chose to write my thesis on musical films because I think they were a very important stepping stone in the visual medium of film. The genre of musical films set the standard for motion pictures that followed for years after. *The Jazz Singer (1927)* holds a significant place in film history because it was the first "talkie" movie that contained singing and dancing also. The objective of my research was to find out if musical films gave audiences escapism from their everyday lives and to see if musical films had any major impact on society at the time. I aim to expose the social agendas of the movie studio Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, and the effects and benefits it had. The work of two films, *Annie Get Your Gun (1950)* and *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers (1954)* is explored in the body of this work, namely George Sidney, Stanley Donen, Michael Kidd and Arthur Freed. By focusing on the work of these particular people, it is possible to explore a wide array of material and issues, including representations of women, men, sexuality, and race. The ideas expressed in this work are validated with reference to many film critics and theorist, as well as by close reading of each film. By the close of this thesis, it will become clear that re-introducing the issues beneath the surface of these films is a constructive approach to encouraging people to realise the depth that they can contain.

INTRODUCTION

The objective of this thesis is to outline and explore the possible effects that musical films may of had on society in America throughout the 1950's. This study will intend to argue that they had positive effects on audiences and provided them with a sense of much needed escapism. I will do this by analysing two Metro-Goldwyn Mayer movie musicals and relating them to the history and world issues that were taking place around them at the time.

This thesis will do this along side discussing some of the themes that the musicals included such as Post World War II issues, depictions of women, depictions of men, racism and transitions. It will explore the genre through the work of two specific movies, the first being *Annie Get Your Gun (1950)* Directed by Charles Walters, George Sidney and Busby Berkeley, Produced by Arthur Freed, Music and lyrics by Irving Berlin and screenplay by Sidney Sheldon. Winning an Academy Award for Best Music Scoring of a Musical Picture, this film is still well known and loved by many today. The second movie will be Stanley Donen's *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers (1954)* music written by Saul Chaplin and Gene de Paul, lyrics by Johnny Mercer and choreographed by Michael Kidd, which won Best Score at the 27th Academy Awards, was listed number eight in the "Top 10 MGM Musicals' and in 2008 it was ranked number 464 in Empire Magazine's list of the 500 Greatest Films of All Time.

Although films of this particular genre have died out in recent years and are now categorised as 'classics' they held characteristics that are not seen in films today.

They had an innocence about them with lavish background scenery and locations that would have stunned audiences at the time, but most of all they were made to showcase outstanding talent and that is exactly what they did. Musical films are usually understood to be happy-go-lucky films of the past, however, today these films are still loved not just by the generation that grew up when they were made but by young children and families today. For example *The Wizard of Oz (1939), Singin' In The Rain (1952)* and *The Sound of Music (1965)* are guaranteed to be viewed by families all over the world during Christmas time, along with many other films such as *Annie (1982)* and *Oliver! (1968)* Which are considered to be childhood essentials, not to mention all of the classic Disney films that also fall into the musical genre, all of which are still treasured today.

The first chapter will discuss the era in which this study is based on, 1950s America. It will explore the historic background, which is essential in order to fully understand the impact these movies had on audiences at the time. The second chapter will talk about the 'Golden Age' musical era of Hollywood, and about the industry throughout that time in America. This study will mainly outline the impact the famous studio Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer had on the industry and the effects the films it produced had on its audiences. The third chapter will be a case study, which will analyse *Annie Get Your Gun* and *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*. This discussion will bring the hidden messages throughout the films to the surface along with the not so subconscious messages and themes that are being presented to us as viewers. Throughout this thesis the main question of; 'did musical films offer an escape to American citizens during the post-war 1950's?' will be asked.

Ultimately, this study aims to examine how musical films impacted their audiences at the time they were released, was it positive or negative? Were they effective in any sort of way? Were they escapism or just pure and simple entertainment? This study will endeavor to present and answer a number of questions throughout, such as; did the films portray a certain group of people in a specific way to the audiences, whether it was post war men, women or Native Americans. Did they encourage men or women to act a certain way or towards each other? Did they effect their perspectives on women or racial segregation? Did they help people escape from their everyday struggles? It will also explore the reasons why this genre had attracted so much attention and following during its era. This study contends that the genre still stands on its own two feet today because it allows people of all ages to develop their own ideas, imaginations and attitudes about the world by living vicariously through their favourite genre of film.

The definition of escapism is "the tendency to see distraction and relief from unpleasant realities, especially by seeking entertainment or engaging in fantasy." (Oxford, 2013) The word escapism itself usually takes on a negative implication, suggesting that people are unhappy in their life and their environment around them. People go to the cinema to experience other people's stories and struggles, to take a step back to look and experience the world through someone else's eyes and sometimes they go purely to escape their own every day life and disappear into a world of fantasy or fiction. This leads onto the discussion of genre and the different kinds of genres that are on offer to people; comedies, tragedies, science fiction, adventure, action, crime, faction, historical, horror, mystery, political, animation or most importantly in this case the musical.

Escapist films usually consist of a stretch far beyond the boundaries of the audience's existence. This doesn't necessarily mean that the film must contain dramatic adventure or action but can be filled with deep emotional levels, love stories, and human dramas. Cinema has been the highest form of escapism since it's invention. As humans we tend to yearn for certain scenarios, for our lives to be more interesting, for that right person to come along etc. not only do movies fill that void but it also allows us to push our experiences and boundaries into a safe mode. We may never achieve some of the things we desire but a slight glimpse of that certain want while sitting comfortably in front of a screen is very appealing to many. Musical movies were the predominant form of escapism into a giddy world where all the girls could sing, were beautiful and incredible dancers and their leading men were not only sophisticated and smooth but were musically skilled as well.

Movies that sang and danced represented the peak in the motion picture achievement and a unique art form reflecting the escapist fantasies of a generation of moviegoers from *The Jazz Singer* to *Chicago*. Musicals, and especially musicals about musicals, are prepared to deliver escapism.

> By combining two of the most enjoyed mediums, music and movies,
> into one classic story of perseverance, spectacle and romance
> virtually every available outlet for enchantment is fully made use of.
> (Stewart, 2013)

CHAPTER 1

America in the 1950's

During the 1950's, America experienced noticeable economic growth, with a significant rise in manufacturing and home construction in the mist of a post World War II economic boom. A growing economy helped form the blissful retrospective view of the 1950's. While Europe was rebuilding itself, it was eager for American goods, fueling the consumer-oriented sector of the American economy. The Cold War and it's connected conflicts helped create a politically conservative atmosphere in the country. The fear of communism caused public congressional hearings in both houses of congress, at the same time, anti communism was the prevailing response in the US through this tough period. Notable US events during the decade included The Korean war, the election of Dwight Eisenhower, The Red Scare, Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott, anti-communism concerns of the McCarthy-era, and the U.S reaction to the 1957 launch by the Soviet Union of the Sputnik Satellite. Prior to all of this there was the Japanese attack on Pear Harbor in 1941, which then lead to D-Day in 1944.

The 1950's are noted in the United States history as a time of traditional values, conformity, fulfillment but also to a certain extent, of rebellion. During this time there was a market for films to give audiences an escape from their everyday lives and the paranoia that surrounded them. "Hollywood's musicals, sometimes patriotic, sometimes nostalgic (and often both), provided a much needed morale boost before, during and after the war." (Kendrick, n.d.). There was a huge sense of uneasiness throughout the time, which heightened after the Cold War. "Cinema's manipulative

power as a tool in the enforcement of ideology came of age in the mid-twentieth century and has never abated." (Von Dassanowsky, 2003)

One major event during the Cold War was the Berlin Airlift. After World War II, the United States and its allies divided Germany. Berlin was a part of communist East Germany and the city was divided into east and west. In June 1948, Soviet forces blocked all railways and roads that lead to the western part of Berlin. President Truman quickly ordered military airplanes to fly coal, food, and medicine to the city. The planes were frequent, sometimes landing every few minutes, for more than a year. The United States received assistance from Britain and France and together, they offered almost two and one-half million tons of supplies on about two-hundred-eighty thousand flights. In the 1950s, the United States began sending military advisers to help South Vietnam defend itself against communist North Vietnam. That aid would the later expand into a long and bloody period of American involvement in Vietnam. In 1959, Cold War tensions eased a little and the new Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev visited Eisenhower for a friendly meeting, which was ultimately unsuccessful because relations between them worsened once again.

"During the Eisenhower era, Americans achieved a level of prosperity they had never known before. While other parts of the world struggled to rebuild from the devastation of World War II, citizens of the United States saw their standard of living surpass what previous generations had only dreamed about." (The 1950's, n.d.) "The Fabulous Fifties was an era of identical pink pressboard suburban houses filled with smiling, apron-clad housewives. All the men wear slippers and fedoras and smoke pipes, all the girls are teenaged and wear poodle skirts, and all the boys are cute,

freckle faced scamps with slingshots in their pockets. Parents sleep in separate beds and only kiss each other on the cheek." (The Fifties, TV Tropes, n.d.)

After World War II ended, prosperity and peace began to wear away the public's desire for lightheaded, escapist movie musicals. The fifties provided a platform of these principles. Fifties culture offered and even demanded political, social and economic homogeneity, from the post-war prosperity to fears of the Cold War and the gradual emergence of a counter culture were some of the issues that American's were facing at the time. The political roots of the Cold War and it's beginning manifestation, was happening on American Society, the Baby Boom and the economic prosperity that followed World War II was also happening along with the growth and prosperity of the decade earned it the label of the "Fabulous Fifties". But not every American benefited from the economic boom and opportunities that followed WWII. For example women were expected to retreat back into domesticity after their participation in the wartime defenses industries. In addition, African Americans still lived as second-class citizens in many areas of the nation in segregated societies.

> It was a nation where the popular culture of television was both reflecting and influencing its lifestyle. It was also a nation that believed it was on the edge of nuclear war. Americans were happy to put World War II, which ended in 1945, behind them, and to stay hopeful, wishing for the peace to last. By 1950, however, political tensions were high again. The Soviet Union and The United States

were allies during World War II, but after the war they became

enemies in what came to be known as the Cold War. (Ember. 2014)

Communists had taken over rule of many Eastern European nations. The leader of

The Soviet Union, Josef Stalin, helped strengthen its armed forces. Meanwhile the

United States believed that they alone, owned the most powerful weapon of its time,

the atomic bomb. But during the late 1940s an American Air Force aircraft exposed

some strange conditions in the atmosphere, which was then found to be the Soviet

Union testing its own atomic bomb, this led to the nuclear race. It was clear that the

two nations were competing to build weapons of mass destruction. "A 'doomsday

clock' on the cover of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists warned of a growing

danger of nuclear destruction. Members of the atomic scientists were afraid of what

science had produced, and were even more afraid of what it the effects could be. By

1949, the time on the doomsday clock was 3 minutes to midnight." (Ember. 2014)

There was also the issue of survival at this time, at home and through media,

bomb shelters became an important service. The availability, variety and advertised

"need" for family shelters was exploited and allowed Americans to believe that a

nuclear attack would only temporarily disrupt American life, this gave a wide-spread

feeling of paranoia throughout American homes. "The United States had a real enemy

in the Soviet Union and hostilities were played out solidly through the establishment

of NATO and the Warsaw Pact, the Space Race and the Korean War" (Boyer, 1999).

A lot of issues at the time were direct threats to the upright morals and values of the

era and anyone who gets in the way will not be afforded a spot in the basement bomb

shelter when the Red drop 'The Big One'. "Meanwhile, Martin Luther King and the

burgeoning Civil Rights Movement stride across America, slowed down only by the occasional Corrupt Hick. The birth of rock 'n' roll took place in this era, to the horror of Moral Guardians, which also showed resurgence in popularity." (The Fifties. TV Tropes, n.d.)

"In 1950, the invasion of North Korea into South Korea began. The Korean War lasted from June 1950 until the Korean peace agreement, which was signed in 1953. It began as a civil war between Republic of Korea, South Korea and communist North Korea. The United States, acted on behalf of the United Nations, were required to repel the North Korean invasion. A monument for the veterans of the war was not created until the 1990s." (Dunar. 2006) The Korean war heightened efforts by the U.S to develop a weapon a more effective and deadly weapon than the atomic bomb. This led to the lethal hydrogen bomb. Meanwhile, The Soviets were also working on developing their own hydrogen bomb, the race continued. The paranoia that was in the air during the time encouraged some Americans to build bomb shelters in their back gardens, so that in the event of a nuclear attack they will have somewhere safe to go. But a lot of Americans were sick and tired of living in fear and after years of sacrifice, they decided that they wanted to enjoy the good life in an economy that was on the rise.

Military hero of WWII Dwight Eisenhower was elected president in 1952, he remained president for most of the nineteen fifties. "He faced the problems of communism, nuclear threats and racial tensions. He was known for having a calming way of speaking to the public during such troubles. Many Americans saw him as a fatherly president. They thought that even in a dark and dangerous world, everything

would be okay. In the years after the war, America produced the Baby Boom generation. In 1950 there were 24,000,000 children in American, and by 1960 that number was 35,000,000. More families led to the need for more houses, and bigger families meant bigger houses. In 1950 alone, almost 1,500,000 new homes were build in America." (Ember. 2014) "The paradoxical nature of the Fifties was evident in the cultural arena. The Eisenhower era was a time of both squeaky-clean Disneyland and unkempt, edgy beatniks." (The 1950s, n.d.) "The power and importance of television and film during this time period cannot be over exaggerated because it was through this media that American culture shaped it's fifties family values, because they always demonstrated the supposed norms for the American citizen and American families in the 1950's." (Menante, n.d.)

There were times when President Eisenhower tended to stay away from controversy, which could be viewed as a mistake. One of the major matters facing the nation during the campaign and the early years of Eisenhower's presidency was that Senator Joseph McCarthy's near-obsessive operation to root out the Communists who had apparently penetrated America's government and society. McCarthy had begun hunting Communists in government and public life in 1950. By 1952 he was flinging accusations around indiscriminately, wildly alleging Communist infiltration of all sectors of American society. McCarthyism put a chill on honest political debate for much of the decade and ruined the careers of hundreds of Americans. It made a mockery of traditional American values of due process and equal justice. Eisenhower failed to stand

up to the Senator and this was seen as a missed opportunity to turn

the nation away from a damaging course. (The 1950s, n.d.)

Another concern that Eisenhower should have intervened in was the civil rights movement, his overly guarded political ways made him aware of what was going on but was blind to the depth of their impatience with the racial class system, The Jim Crow Laws.

Unfortunately the fifties wasn't the idealised fabulous decade for every American. Men were either shipped of to the war to fight or brought back injured, women were made to work and gain independence while their men were away and not long after encouraged to retract their newly found independence they had just discovered because they're husbands came home, along with the fact that much of America was still segregated. "The baby boom, the emergence of the nuclear family, and even Freudian psychology steered women towards a new expression of domesticity." (Menante, n.d.) Farnham and Lindbergy explained that, "Only by accepting her place as wife, mother, homemaker and by erasing her 'masculine-aggression'" could woman be content (Miller, 1977). Nevertheless, the notion of the 1950's as happy days lived on. The end of World War II brought thousands of young servicemen back to America to pick up their lives and start new families in hew homes with new jobs. With an energy never before experienced, American industry expanded to meet peacetime needs. Americans began buying goods not available during the war, which created corporate expansion and jobs, there was growth everywhere and the baby boom as underway.

When we consider the 1950's, the principal element that comes to mind is Rock n' Roll. The style originally developed from Southern blues and gospel music with an added strong background beat, this genre of music started to become popular with teenagers who were trying to break out of the conventional, traditional mainstream of the time, also known as the American middle class type. But music in the fifties was more than just rock n' roll, famous crooners, such as Frank Sinatra, Nat King Cole, and Perry Como were idols of the new rockers of the era who began to develop the new sounds of America.

American cinema of the 1950's expressed both celebration and disillusionment toward such subjects as consumerism, popular culture, the American Dream, and even the American family. As a result of the invention of television, the studios and companies needed to encourage audiences back in movie theatres. Films of the 1950's began to become widely diverse. The argument of, 'was television having a negative effect on Americans?' began almost immediately during the Fifties, people asked did it discourage reading? Destroy the sense of community? Shorten attention spans? Turn citizens into passive consumers or even promote violence? This led to the studios having to change their methods of presenting their films; widescreen was introduced along with VistaVision, cinemascope and cinerama as well as 3 Dimensional film. Other big-scoped films thrived internationally, such as films by Russian fantasy director Aleksandr Ptushko, and Japanese director Akira Kurosawa's films. These films showed, among others, that this spectacle approach to films along with the paranoia that came with the Cold War seemed to renew an interest in science

from the atomic bomb, and boost interest in mysteries of outer space, which evidently lent itself well to this film decade of science fiction.

This particular decade is equally skilled at both character and realistic films. Western films were also on the rise during this era. Highly noted actors of the time were James Stewart, John Wayne and Marlon Brando. "But the Hollywood musical has always been seen as an expression of unbounded joy and physical liberation because the libidinal energy released in the numbers is not linear, that is, not consistent with the conservative, teleological economy of classical narrative." (Cohan, 2002)

CHAPTER 2

The Golden Age of Hollywood

"Entertainment is a type of performance produced for profit, performed before a generalized audience (the 'public'), by a trained, paid group who do nothing else but produce performances which have the sole (conscious) aim of providing pleasure." (Dyer, Richard. 2002) The musical film is a particularly special genre because musicals were essentially the predominant type of film during the golden age of Hollywood. Musicals of the golden age are those that were made between 1950 and 1965, during this period over a third of all films that came out of Hollywood contained singing and dancing. In the golden age musicals were more ludicrous, the costumes flamboyant, the extremes sillier, the politics more reactionary and the lyrics snappier than anything that came before or after. They are more vulnerable to the accusations of stereotyping as just a nostalgia gender and the fabrication of human experiences that even the silliest TV sitcoms of the era are guilty of. But this golden age had to stem from something. There was an obvious demand and an audience for it.

Born with the 20th century the movie was regarded at first as a mere novelty. Audiences thrilled at the sight of pictures that moved but many said that the first primitive dramatic films held a form of entertainment that would sweep the world. From the beginning, early filmmakers exploited the basic elements of universal appeal, romance, laughter, violent action and thrills. Barely a generation later the movies popularity surpassed all other forms of entertainments out in public. The inspired insanity of the Marx brothers for instance delights people still to this very

day. By the end of the First World War movies were becoming big business, a few major studios were beginning to dominate the industry most were controlled by theatre owners who needed to assure themselves of a steady supply of pictures. In 1924 two big studios that were in financial trouble decided to merge, Metro Pictures and the Goldwyn Company, the third name on the company was a self-made, independent producer known as Hollywood legend Louis B. Mayer, who decided to run the newly named studio, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. The studio which was also called the Dream Factory's social structure resembled a bee hive, complex and ridged with all of it's activity aimed at nurturing and protecting the queen, in Hollywood's case, the collective body of stars, without whom all others would be nothing. The dream mentors believed that stars were born not made. Because Hollywood made dreams, sold them and often lived them, the things the factory told the world about itself took on a dream like quality, leading to the question of where reality ended and the dream began.

Through most of the Great Depression, when bread sold for nine cents a loaf and milk for twelve cents a quart, the American film industry, the dream factory thrived. Hollywood stars earned 5,000 dollars a week or more and at the major studios fifty-four executives made over sixty-five thousand a year. Surprisingly the public seemed to show little resentment towards the industry and the people involved, movie stars were privileged on and off screen and seen as god like figures. The fancy clothes, exotic cars, extravagant jewels and furs all seemed proper and fitting for the members of the factory. Audiences went to films to experience scenes of incredible luxury none would have ever experienced in any other way. As the years few by stars

of MGM had to learn the hard lesson of having to either adapt or perish with the times ahead of them.

"What makes the musical unique among film genres is not so much that its heyday neatly coincides with the studio years, but rather that its reflexive capability rendered it the genre whose explicit function was to glorify American entertainment while at the same time being itself a form of entertainment (as were all genre films)" (Feuer. 1993, p.90). "It has been the mission of the screen, without ignoring the serious social problems of the day, to reflect aspiration, optimism, and kindly humor on its entertainment." (Dunne, Michael. 2004) How is this possible you might ask? "Well the first step towards achieving this would be to connect the logically opposed cinematic elements of realism and escapism with the diegetic or performance settings suitable to each. For example a successful Depression musical comedy might be expected to use highly differentiated settings to present the conflicting content of realist representation and healthy escapism." (Dunne, 2004, p.14)

Musicals are a difficult genre to keep alive; a lot of investment, time, talent and money is required, which investors were reluctant to give especially during and after the economic crash of the early 1930's. "The stock market collapse of 1929 had a tremendous impact of every aspect of American culture. "Several smaller studios were forced to close down, most of the majors came close, and by 1933 almost a third of all movie theatre in the U.S. were forced to shut down. However, the industry survived the Great Depression by meeting a very real need." (Kendrick. Part I, n.d.)

True, the movie business would never again enjoy the figures of

1929, when 23,000 theatres were visited by an average of 95 million

people a week. By 1936 the number of screens would be shaved by a

third, the number of weekly filmgoers would also decline

permanently, slashed by radio. Still, never was escapist

entertainment needed more than during the Depression. Hollywood

rose to the occasion. As the wolf settled in for a lengthy stay,

entertainment provided solace and balm. But reduced priced and

varied giveaways were not enough to lure people into trading hard

earned pennies for filmed vaudeville. They wanted magic and

romance and novelty; stories with happy endings and a chastened

wolf. (Giddins. 2001, p.205)

Despite the utopian optimism of the genre, the musical began to break down later in

the 1950's. For example; Hollywood released more than one hundred screen musicals

in 1930 and only 14 in 1931. "In the beginning of the second half of the decade, the

genre began to suffer a surprising decline in production, quality and popularity. In

1943, Hollywood studios released 65 musicals, but a decade later the number was

down to 38, and in 1963, only 4." (Decline and Change n.d.) This pressure started the

drop in popularity of musical films. "The industry was then caught off guard when a

series of dance-infused musicals from Warner Brothers, the leader in 'talkies', gave

screen musicals a new lease on life." (Kendrick, Part II) Forty-second street which

was released in 1933 directed by Lloyd Berkeley, was a surprise hit, which

established several show business musical plot clichés; the hard-nosed Broadway

director who is literally dying for a new hit, the egotistical star who breaks an ankle

which then finally makes way for the unknown talent chorus kid who gets a chance to shine. With this new injection of life into film musicals the industry picked up again and studios such as 20th Century Fox, Paramount, Fox and Universal established their stars and produced musical films that are still well known today. Famous duo's and trio's were the main aspect to the films, musicals films were all about showcasing talent, and that's exactly what they did. With stars such as Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, Bing Crosby and Donald O'Connor, Gene Kelly and Danny Kane the musical film could do no wrong.

The 1950's were both the brightest and darkest years for the Hollywood musical. The genre reached its peak with two musicals winning Academy Awards for Best Picture. However, at the same time, television drew millions of customers away from movie theatre which sped up the death of the studios that had made lavish screen musicals possible. "In the mid-1940s, 90 million Americans went to the movies each week- by the late 1950s, that figure had dwindled to 16 million." (Kendrick, John. End of an Era). The industry had lost its economic kick. "The rapid decline of musicals in the late 1950s was at least partly the result of an ever-widening gap between the music used in the movies the studios were making and the music the increasing percentage of the nation was actually enjoying, namely, the new rock 'n' roll. After World War II, the big bands became economically unfeasible, and small combos began electrifying their instruments and playing up-tempo rhythm and blues, which white artists such as Bill Haley and Elvis Presley popularized with mainstream white audiences." (Decline and Change n.d.).

In a business where profit margins are so important, musicals were all of a sudden not worth the risk, especially original score screen musicals. They were heavy investments, in cast, rehearsals for large groups of people, large orchestra, orchestrations, recordings, lengthy shooting sessions and unless they paid of handsomely the studios became weary of doing them. This led to the production of film musicals that were adapted from the stage musical version. Even though studios were fading, Hollywood still managed to produce a number of concrete musical films and a few extraordinary originals that were scattered among the adapted stage shows, for example; *An American in Paris* in *1951, Singin' in the Rain* in *1952, White Christmas* in *1954, High Society* in *1956, Carousel* in *1956, The King and I* also in *1956, Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* in *1957, Oklahoma* in *1958* and *South Pacific* also in *1958.* "During the Golden Age, twenty musicals enjoyed initial Broadway runs exceeding one thousand performances, previously unprecedented except for two revues in the late 1930s. More than fifty other book musicals from the 1950s and '60s surpassed the five-hundred-performance mark." (H. Kowalke, n.d.)

> Because entertainment is produced by professional entertainers, it is
> also largely defined by them. That is to say, although entertainment
> is part of the coinage of everyday thought, nonetheless how it is
> defined, what it is assumed to be, is basically decided by those
> people responsible (paid) for providing it in concrete form.
> Professional entertainment is the dominant agency for defining what
> entertainment is. This does not mean, however, that it simply
> reproduces and expresses patriarchal capitalism. There is the usual

struggle between capital (the backers) and labour (the performers)

over control of the product. (Dyer. 2002, p19)

In an era that brought harsh reality home with the war on terror, communism rising and an economy gone bust, Hollywood became more of a dream factory than ever, embracing fantastic escapism at a time when audiences needed it most. The Dream Factory refers to Hollywood in its role as the center of the American film industry; it shows us who we want to be rather than who we are. It's where thousands of people work to produce fantasies that millions of others will buy. It was in its time the greatest theatrical enterprise the world has ever known and a massive assembly line for production of dreams and profits. Hollywood did not invent the movies but it polished and perfected the art of making them, and the business of selling them to an audience of millions. Hundreds of films were produced every year by big movie studios called the 'studio system'. Within the dream factories guarded walls created all kinds of forms of delight and adventure, it was a place of ultimate illusion where any scene the human mind could conceal could be brought to life on film. "People may have had more reason to sing in the rain during the immediate postwar period than during the tensions of the Cold War in the 1950s and 1960s, but the difficulties of the Depression and the war years had stimulated the musical rather than stifled it." (Decline and Change n.d.)

In these movies, stars are nicer than we are, characters more straightforward than people we know, situations more soluble than those we encounter. All this we recognise through representational signs. But we also recognize qualities in non-

representational signs- colour, texture, movement, rhythm, melody, camerawork-
although we are much less used to talking about them. (Dyer. 2002, p.20)

The movie musical emerged in an era of intense cultural conflict and
competition: between traditional theatre and cinema; between the story-driven
musical and the more vaudeville-like revue; and between jumped-up jazz and music-
hall pop. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer went through the same process of trial and error
with musicals as nearly every other Hollywood studio, but MGM quickly developed
reputation as a place that nurtured and properly showcased talented performers,
choreographers, and directors. Many – if not the majority- of movie musicals revered
by fans of classic Hollywood feature the roar of the MGM lion. (Murray. 2011)

"Two of the taken-for-granted descriptions of entertainment, as 'escape' and as
'wish-fulfillment', point to its central thrust, namely, utopianism. Entertainment offers
the image of 'something better' to escape into or something we want deeply that our
day-to-day lives don't provide. Alternatives, hopes and wishes- these are the stuff of
utopia, the sense that things could be better, that something other than what is can be
imagined and maybe realized. Entertainment does not, however, present models of
utopian worlds, rather the utopianism in contained in the feelings it embodies. It
presents head-on as it were, what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be
organized." (Dyer. 2002, p.20) Richard Dyer argues that, far from being escapist, the
musical is responsive to history through its form, which articulates in non-
representational terms what utopia feels like. (Cohen, 2002)

The classic period of the [Arthur] Freed Unit MGM musical may have extinguished its flame in the mid-1950's but musical entertainment endured and Hollywood musicals continued to be made. What seemed to die out in the mid-1950s was the energy at the heart of the great MGM musicals, an energy based on faith in the power of singing and dancing connected with an almost religious belief in Hollywood itself as the great inheritor of the spirit of musical entertainment." (Feuer, 1993. p.87) "During the 1950's, MGM's profit/loss charts resembled a roller coaster ride, with just one or two hits keeping the studio afloat. (Bignen, et al. n.d)

To many modern viewers, the golden age of the movie musical has passed with good reason. The 1950s was an era of such Technicolor masterpieces, for example; An *American in Paris* in *1951* or *The Band Wagon* in *1953*, but today most musicals are seen as silly, frivolous antiques. "Hollywood musicals can continue to be 'satisfying' after the conditions of their production and reception have perceptibly changed. It is clear, for example, from television's attention to musicals in recent years that moviemakers can no longer assume that "a nice musical" is what most filmgoers are looking for." (Dunne. 2002, p.10) "But no other art form reflects American culture in post-World War II era so vividly, fully, or accurately. During the period between the two world wars, as the United States had become aware of its increasingly dominant role in global economics and politics, there was a shared perception that the nation needed to take on responsibility as a cultural leader as well, and the musical theatre emerged as a site for a uniquely American contribution.: (H. Kowalke, n.d.) Evoking the industrial context in which musicals were made, only begins to describe the genre's cultural significance as mainstream entertainment

during the studio era. If one can just look deeper into these films one can see incredible hidden messages that were meant for the average mid-century American.

The major Hollywood studios produced the popular entertainment of its time, but unlike the amphitheatres of ancient Greece or the stages of Shakespearean England, The Dream Factory left its legacy intact. The producers grand conception, a writers subtle art, the magical realisation of brilliant directors and actors are beyond mortality and remain for future generations to study and enjoy. Hollywood, The Dream Factory, at its worse was extravagant, vulgar and crass, but at its best it offered a rich, compelling, romantic world of elusion, while no one can be certain, the world will probably not see anything quite like it again.

CHAPTER 3

MGM's successful musicals.

Case Study

'Where there are more stars than there are in heavens.' - Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer:

"Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer was the only studio that showed an annual profit and paid regular bonuses to shareholders through every year of the Great Depression. More than any other studio, MGM used audience reactions from sneak previews to re-shape and re-shoot its films." (Kendrick, John. Part IV) "By the mid-50's, MGM's various musical units were working as well-oiled machines, turning out more than a half-dozen quality films a year, many of which are now widely regarded as classics." (Murray, n.d.) As the premiere movie factory, MGM studios were a self-sufficient, self-proclaimed "city within a city" built on six separate lots and spread across 185 fenced and gated acres.

In the group of successful musicals that have been mentioned previously, many of which belonged to Metro-Goldwyn Mayer. *Singin' In The Rain* and *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* were each at one point called "the best movie musical ever made" by different critics and fans. They are everything entertainment should be, with fresh witty story telling, wonderful casts and handsome productions. "'Do it right… make it big… give it class!' was the studio's motto, and where better to practice this philosophy than a multitude of controllable environments, which proved remarkably durable against the elements and the occasional earthquake." (Hollywood's greatest backlot)

"You Can't Get a Man With a Gun" – Annie Get Your Gun.

Annie Get Your Gun was released in 1950 and is the birth place of some of the most famous musical songs still known today, 'There's no business like show business,' and 'Anything you can do I can do better'. The story is loosely based on the life of 'sharpshooter' Annie Oakley, as the film explores the ways of the west it pulls on your heartstrings at the same time. Like many movie musicals the film was recycled from the original Broadway show*, Annie Get Your Gun*, it was quickly adapted and made into this wonderful movie. It was originally bought for superstar Judy Garland but unfortunately she was fired during shooting which led to Betty Hutton taking her place. There are many different qualities to *Annie Get Your Gun* that you wouldn't find in your average traditional movie musical. It is not about a delicate female who falls madly in love with the man of her dreams, instead it is about a tomboy whose best friend is her double barrel shotgun. Annie finds it difficult to act ladylike around men, and is sick and tired of being over-looked, she wants to be noticed. You also won't necessarily find your generic 'Broadway Ballet' in here but instead the audience is thrilled with extravagant scenes of the Wild West. Betty Hutton who plays Annie is a brassy, loud, spirited young woman from the back woods of western state.

We first meet Annie after she shoots a bird off the top of a woman's hat, everyone in the crowd automatically jump to the conclusion that they are under attack by Indians, but quickly learn that it was only this young girl who made the impressive shot. Annie and her younger siblings shoot and sell birds for a living and when a gentleman happens to see Annie's impressive shooting he asks her to shoot a bird for

him. He then invites her to enter into a shooting contest against the handsome Frank Butler who is played by Howard Keel, but when Annie see's him she goes weak at the knees. He see's her holding her gun and says "You get that back to your pappy and get yourself a couple of knitting needles." Annie doesn't even notice his condescending remark because she is so besotted with him. She asks him what kind of girl he likes and he replies with a response women can relate today; "I like the kind that you see in picture magazines," as he launches into a song he states that the girl he will marry "will wear satins and laces and smell of cologne." While Frank sings about his dream girl is it obvious that Annie doesn't stand a chance with this man the way she is, although charming, Annie is rough and scruffy. This leads her into her song "You can get a man with a gun", where she sings about how she has a hard time with the men. "Oh a man never trifles with girls who carry rifles, oh you can't get a man with a gun."

Even though Annie is introduced before the competition as a man resulting in laughter, she still goes on to win the shooting contest; this damages Frank's ego and pride. Buffalo Bill who is played by Louis Calhern asks Annie to travel with their show across the country. Annie quickly accepts, mainly because of the idea of being in Frank Butler presence every day.

As she travels with the show Annie begins to transform. With help from the other women on the tour she starts to dress nice and learns how to read, which encourages Frank to notice her more. The producers of the travelling show know how naïve Annie is and how head over heels in love she is with Frank so they convince her to do her trick in the next show and convince her that once Frank see's her doing her

trick he will ask her to marry him. Posters are made of Annie to boost ticket sales; this pushes Frank to leave the show. His ego and pride as a man has made him jealous when all Annie wanted was to please and impress him. Annie does bemoan the fact that she has been weak enough to fall for Frank while singing the famous number "I Got Lost in His Arms" and tries finding consolation in the fact that she has a good many things to be happy over, even if love is denied her.

After Annie tours Europe without Frank they finally see each other again but just when things are going well Frank see's all of the medals Annie was given by people around the world and instead of being happy for her, he throws a tantrum, "What a wife she'd make, instead of attending to the house she's be cleaning her guns, instead of staying home and sowing she'd be out hitting targets." To which Annie wittily replies "Yeah and you'd be out missing them." The two have a shoot off and perform the age-old song "Anything you can do I can do better." Demonstrating the classic battle of the sexes. Although unconvincingly in the end, after some rough times, love wins out for Annie and Frank, but only because she compromises her talent and lets Frank win the shooting contest, feeding his ego.

Annie Oakley is an enduring character whom you can't help but fall in love with her when she comes onto the screen. She shows women that it is okay to be yourself but its also important to carry yourself correctly. She showed audiences that she was a first-rate markswoman and could handle a rifle as well as and usually better than most men. She is one of the only film heroines of the era who is a rough and tumble backwoods girl. Although at times Annie's actions would contradict themselves throughout the film; she is tough but naïve, rough but gentle, opinionated

but easily manipulated, and although on the exterior she would be seen as the kind of woman who doesn't need a man to complete her, the whole film is truly about her trying to win the heart of Frank Butler.

Every time Annie would see Frank she would stare at him with her eyes open wide and her mouth would drop dramatically to the floor. Although Hollywood is celebrating the life of a ground-breaking American heroine, it is still disappointing that Hollywood conventions of the time still require her to "turn perty" and even throw a competition in order to get her man. Despite this, she is still a rather spirited and positive role model throughout, wearing her heart on her sleeve and working hard to succeed in show business while bettering herself along the way by learning how to read and write.

Another conscious flaw in the film is the hopelessly dated condescending portrayal of the Indians. Perhaps the only thing worse than their traditional Hollywood depiction as savages standing in the way of the white man's westward quest is reducing Indians to a crude joke. Most Hollywood films depicted them as pure savages, which led people to believe that, that was all they were. It's hard to ignore the fact that the era this film is set in was steeped in the bigotry, fear and hatred roiled up by the Indian wars. At that time the general white populace regarded the indigenous peoples as dangerous savages and that itself was part of the thrill and novelty of including them in a circus-like show. In this movie the hatred and violence of the recent past is played down, but unfortunately the "injuns" are still portrayed in a hokey stereotypical fashion for comedic effect. While Chief Sitting Bull is often found to be the voice of

reason, he still speaks in a somewhat annoying "ugh" and "how" manner, typical of movies from this time. While the show is travelling by train from county to county the Indians aboard are exhibited as uncivilized and unsophisticated people. A white woman enters their carriage and firmly says "who told you Indians you could pitch a village in here?" in which they reply "Annie Oakley."

The production number during which Annie is adopted by the Chief is the weakest point of the film. The lack of respect is evident in the issue between modern American's and Native Americans. Racism and ethnic discrimination in the United States has been a major issue since the colonial era and the slave era. "Legally authorized racism sanctioned privileges and rights for white people and not for Native Americans or other ethnic groups. Through wars, massacres, forced displacement and the imposition of treaties, land was taken and numerous hardships imposed since 1540." (Wright, n.d.)

Overall *Annie Get Your Gun* is better known for an outstanding set of songs, the Irving Berlin score for the Broadway production transported almost in its entirety to the film. This film in ways is a naïve celebration and glimpse of bewildering Americana. The music and songs are far more interesting then the story itself or their execution nonetheless. *Annie Get Your Gun* is loud, colorful and almost childish at times due to it unbridled enthusiasm, it was the perfect escape for Americans from their every day struggles that they were facing, transporting them back to the Wild West.

Annie Get Your Gun displays depictions of women, representations of Native Americans and illustrates men's behaviour towards women. All of which, although mean well, are very poor. Unfortunately even though Annie is a strong woman she still needs a man in her life and has to compromise herself to do so. This would have confirmed to women at the time that it's more important to have a husband than to be independent and different. The representation of the Native Americans, like many Hollywood films at the time, is degrading and embarrassing, and encouraged Americans to think that they were just ill-educated savages. And finally the illustration of men's behaviour towards women is confusing because, although Frank is condescending and arrogant towards Annie she still falls head over heels for him, we also feel at times that Frank doesn't even truly love Annie because if he did he would have been happy for her and been satisfied if she had of won the competition, but instead he is dominating, egotistical and proud. In ways this would have reinforced the idea once again, that if there's a chance of getting a husband, don't let it slip by, yet at the time this was the American Dream and was encouraged in many aspects of life. But one thing you can't deny is its success as pure entertainment

"Love is like the measles. You only get it once, and the older you are, the harder you take It." – Seven Brides for Seven Brothers.

Stanley Donen's *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers (1954*) is a period piece, set in the Americans West, Oregon, in the mid-19th century and is still as vibrant and electric as it was when it was first released. In 1953 production began on a film called *'Sobbin' Women'*, a musical version of the ancient Roman tale about the rape of the Sabine women, based on the story *'Sobbin' Women'* by Stephen Vincent Benet, the classic story was then transported to Oregon in 1805. *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* was one of the first films for MGM to be released in Cinemascope, but due to many theatres not being equipped to show cinemascope the picture was shot twice, one for the conventional flat version and one for cinemascope. Stanley Donen basically shot two films in effect because the studio said that "MGM pictures are pure and they don't compromise, if its going to be shown in a theatre that can't do it we want to have a separate negative." (Donen, 1954)

The MGM marketing department decided that no one would go see a picture called *'Sobbin' Women'* and changed the name to *'A Bride for Seven Brothers'*, but they still felt that this was a little to titillating and kept searching for a new title. Another problem they had was with a particular song in the movie called 'Lonesome polecat'. They received a complaint saying that it contained " …extremely offensive jokes about men and sheep…" the song states "a man cant sleep when he sleeps with sheep." Ridiculous yes, but a problem that had to be dealt with nonetheless, so the sheep were kept inside their stable throughout the number. The picture was given a

new title *"Seven Brides for Seven Brothers"* and on February 2nd 1954, after 48 days of shooting, the movie was released.

Stanley Donen was quite disappointed with some of the scenes in the movie. With budget cuts and little support from the studio, it is very noticeable that MGM felt because it cost half as much as what a normal feature would cost, it wouldn't be the greatest success. They had more faith in a movie that cost three times more to make at the time called *'Brigadoon'*, but when *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* opened in Radio City Music Hall the picture's unexpected success grew and grew earning a profit of four million dollars. President Eisenhower even made a commercial encouraging fellow Americans to go and see this wonderful wholesome picture.

In this film, there is a strong sense of Stanely Donen's focus on gender roles of post War Americans; both ex-army men as well as their women waiting back at home for them, this can be seen predominantly in the famous barn-raising sequence. Donen's portrayal of post-war men and women through the Seven Pontibee brother's and their love interests is fascinating. In order to fully appreciate this point, one must discuss the historical context of the time. Rugged post-war, ex-military men were encouraged by the nation to become more 'sophisticated' and 'civilized'. Post-war women were urged to lose their newfound independence, which they had gained whilst their men where away at war, and let the men retake control again. "The outbreak of World War II created a critical need for vast increases in the number of women in the paid workforce. This necessitated a temporary reversal of the relative

promotion of women's two functions, a reversal which highlighted the usually imperceptible participation of women in the paid workforce." (Beaton. 1982)

Many women saw the war as a chance for liberation, not only for humanity in general but for the female gender. The situation of the war gave way for strong women to emerge and begin to think for themselves and their families. Riley implies that by 1954 women began to stand on the edge of the nest, ready to fly, creating an emerging consciousness of themselves as women and as people of ability and power. But they were still unsure, Americans who nostalgically desired for an old-fashioned American, pushed to return to pre-war ideals. "By the time WW II ended, women of American went through many changes in their social roles, statuses, images and lifestyles. Women gained ground in certain areas but lost it in others. It is for certain that the war brought disruption to family life, marriage, motherhood and even traditional values but it also led to improvements in attitudes regarding women's employment which let to women's involvement for equal positions in society." (Riley, 1995)

It is clear that the Pontibee brothers in this film symbolize the era's military men returning home. Far from the town, these seven brothers live cramped together in the rugged wilderness, resembling a military camp. With no women around the brothers lost the need for good etiquette, compared to the gentlemanly townsmen we briefly met, the Pontibee brothers resemble animals. When the boys meet their new sister in law, Milly, she begins to teach them manners and how to act around a lady. After a while of training, Milly brings the brothers to a barn raising competition in the local town. It is here we meet the townsmen again, and we quickly learn that both are

competing for the women's attention and approval. When it comes to charming women, like post-war military men, these boys are portrayed as clueless and have hardly ever been exposed to ladies, which prioritised their rugged instincts over mannerly grace. Compared to the Pontibee brothers, the townsmen are shown as beautiful creatures but also extremely delicate and weak. Although they are the ones that instigate the brawls and push the Pontibee brothers to break there gentlemanly act, the suitors still end up loosing. Like post-war women, these ladies were shown to be completely acquiescent to the male characters. They are quickly enchanted by these rugged men and lean on every action and word they say, which makes them look desperate, and naïve.

The important key to understanding Donen's concealed message in this film, is observing how these two groups of people interact with each other. This film appeared during a time where post-war military men were coming home and had to settle back into normal life after years of battle and strife. A normal life to a 1950's American was getting married and settling down with a family. This film was presented to inspire the idea of settling down to post-war Americans, the Pontibee brothers and the townsmen aim to find themselves wives because women in this era were letting go of independence and this is a direct representation of this ideal.

One of the most famous scenes in *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* is the previously mentioned barn-raising dance. Here we really see the characters taking on post-war gender roles through dance. At the start of the sequence we see the brothers meet a group of girls who are friends with Milly. They realize that this is the moment Milly was training them for, so they all step up to the plate and are perfect gentlemen

to all the girls, quickly winning their hearts. Milly, played by Jane Powell observes their behavior as a proud grin sweeps across her face. Powell's character Milly represents the standard of decorum that ex-military men of the period had to bow down to. Milly is the strongest character in the entire film; she is presented with problem after problem with which she deals with grace and pride.

We see Milly first when she is asked to be a wife of a stranger that has approached her for the first time to whom she falls madly in love with, quickly accepting she then learns that she wouldn't only just be taking care of her new husband but his six brothers also, she braves through the rough and disrespectful behavior of her husband and his brothers towards her, their kidnapping of young ladies from the town, her husband abandoning her for the winter and her pregnancy that she so calming progresses through. She truly proves to be a captivating spitfire wife, who goes a long way to balance out the very misogynistic attitudes demonstrated in the macho arrogance of the mountain men.

Famous choreographer Michael Kidd is responsible for the wonderful and exhilarating sequence that is the barn-raising scene that is accompanied by Gene de Paul's music. It is cleverly original because unlike many musicals, it contains hyper-energetic dancing and impressive acrobatic tricks. The choreography ingeniously displays the masculine ways of post-war military men by showing the Pontibee brother as incredibly strong acrobats and skillful dancers. From performing back-flips and summer salts to arm-wrestling on planks of wood and saw horses, each brothers exhibits an act of physical, masculine audacity resembling the post-war American soldiers who were able to show off the notable skills they had gained from the war.

During the barn-raising sequence the brothers control themselves and hold back from fighting the other competitive suitors, who are constantly provoking them. Similar to how ex-soldiers were told to become more civilised to gain a woman's attention and respect from others. The Pontibee brothers alternatively rely on their charm instead of using violence to win their love interest's heart. The brothers, quite literally, place the girls on pedestals and dance to show off their newly polished sophistication. They try to show them that they are fit to be husbands and are no longer a group of coarse men.

Contrasting this, are the women, who perform no acrobatic tricks or put forth as much physical work as the men do in Kidd's choreography. This emphasizes the fact that females during the post-war era had to become more passive to men. The women are literally spectators at this competitive display of choreography. This piece of choreography signifies the post-war notion that women must take a back seat and let the men take over once again, to set the standards and serve as an example to the female audience of the 1950's American housewife.

To reveal the films hidden theme of required marriage, Kidd forms several precise dance sequences to illustrate that the ultimate aim of post-war America was to find a spouse. Noticeably the Pontibee brothers and the six young women are dressed in colorful outfits to subconsciously initiate that they are better fitting to each other then the townsmen who are dressed in grays and navy's. This is then confirmed when the young ladies finish the scene in the arms of the six brothers. It is the Pontibee brothers goal to steal the hearts of the women in the town which eventually leads to quite literally stealing the women. They are determined to win the women as dance partners, which represents the concept of ex-military men setting out to find

themselves a suitable partner for life. Donen and Kidd both provide a strong post-war message to the 1950's America through this barn-raising sequence in particular. Ideal post-war gender roles are greatly highlighted in the dancing as well as the portrayal of the Pontibee brothers and the women of the town.

When the men leave the town and go back home they all find themselves to be lovesick for the first time, missing 'their women'. With some encouragement from their older but not so mature brother they decide to steal 'their women' from their homes. Making off with a screaming crying woman for each brother, their families chase after them. When the women's mouths are uncovered they shriek to their hearts content causing an avalanche, making their escape route back into the town impossible to get through. As the time passes winter comes and goes, bonds begin to form and eventually the girls families come to rescue them, but in the midst of saving them they hear Milly's baby cry. When asked who's it is, all of the women who are now madly in love with the brothers say it is theirs, this ironically leads to the girls fathers forcing the men at gunpoint to marry their daughters. This 'shotgun' wedding, once again, subconsciously, highlights and encourages the importance of a wife and happy family. Seven Brides for Seven Brothers was one of the last musicals to come out of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, and it has become an American musical classic.

Overall *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* represent and encourages the American Dream, working hard together in order to achieve the family, the children, the home, the job and the innocent and wholesome way of life. It would of had a great amount of effects on audiences at the time who were experiencing this lively, civilised and respectable way of life this film was portraying. It shows us a tremendous parallel

way of viewing the post WW II men returning home from their hardship and understanding their mindsets. It also gives us an interesting insight into post WW II women who like Annie had to compromise their independence for love and a better life. This would have really gotten across to the women in the audience who were experiencing it first hand at the time. Also like *Annie Get Your Gun* it displays men's behaviour towards women, at the beginning Milly's husband Adam shows little respect for Milly by expecting her to cook and clean for all seven of them the minute he brings her home. This aspect to the film could have been relatable to some women in the audience at the time.

Many look at films from this era and see them as submissive, but if you look deeper you will find the complete opposite. Musicals should not be seen as completely frivolous, for behind most of them lies something much stronger.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis was to uncover the effects musical films had on society throughout 1950's America. While it is not necessarily certain that the effects were positive and that they offered complete escapism, any film and genre is open to interpretation by its viewer; such is the beauty of film. Finding personal meaning on the screens of film is almost inevitable. The American population during the 1950's were growing up during a time of conflict and change and musical films gave them a great deal of escapism. They offered audiences a place of fantasy and romanticism through times of hardship and confirmed that an all American family is one of the most important things to achieve in life. They encouraged women to be independent to a certain extent and men to be strong and in control. They also delivered incorrect representations of other cultures to audiences, especially the depiction of Native Americans.

This study can conclude that although musical film served as one of the primary modes of escapism for the 1950's American audience, through this study and research it has been highlighted that rock 'n' roll stepped in and took over this role, allowing for a new medium by which people were able to develop their own ideas and thoughts in a less dictated manner. It was evident that the birth of rock 'n' roll truly launched the people of this era into figuring out who they were and identifying a new culture for their booming generation.

Films have the ability to invent the illusion of reality and life, opening up new opportunities and unknown viewpoints on the world. It is why films, especially those

of unknown cultures or places, are so interesting to mass audiences and are taken to be precise representations of life. Film is an extremely strong medium, it has the power to establish visual icons of historical reality along with defining public opinions and attitudes of the time they're depicting or that at which they were filmed. They assemble people for a common cause and can bring important attention to unknown causes. Historical and political films can influence, represent and help create historical awareness as well having the ability to distort events making it a believing and possibly an untrustworthy medium. Some musicals such as *South Pacific, The Sound of Music* and *West Side Story* deal with issues of war and racism and give across strong historical and political messages. Media if one of the biggest influences in our every day lives. Movies nowadays, influence us, inspire us, encourage us and spark emotions inside of us as did musical films did the exact same to audiences during the 1950's.

"A dictionary definition of utopia is "any real or imaginary society, place, or state considered to be perfect or ideal."" (Justine, 2009) In Richard Dryers essay 'Entertainment and Utopia' he discusses musicals as a definition of entertainment: all singing, all dancing films, which create a utopian world. He argues that musicals are pure and simple entertainment and that their main aspiration was to provide pleasure. Dryer discusses how musicals, and entertainment as a whole, offer the image of something better to escape into, or something we want deeply that our every day life doesn't fulfill. Musical films give audiences the idea of a utopian world, leading to the idea that the musical offers a non-specific utopian vision. "Utopia seems to come to surface when the characters in the film begin to sing and dance, they are escaping from the real world and all of the problems that go along with it, so for that length of

time that that musical number lasts the problems and issues are forgotten until they end." (Justine, 2009)

The imaginary escapism is not only for the audience member but also for the character they are watching. Dyer views entertainments capability to evoke what utopia would feel like, creating alternatives, wishes, hopes, "the sense that things could be better, that something other than what is can be imagined and maybe realised." (Dyer, 2002) Dyer proposes that entertainment gains emotional significations by acquiring this significance "in relation to the complex of meanings in the social-cultural situations in which they are produced." This statement is apt, mostly because the musicals I am basing my thesis on are either post-war films full of US values or are escapism-taking place in places such as Hollywood where most of the audience members have only dreamed about and seen on their theatre screens.

The two musicals discussed in this thesis are in ways fairytale musicals in the sense that they take us far from home and dwell mostly on the power of imagination. *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* keeps audiences attention throughout while the six brothers learn how to dance and act like gentlemen with the humor only continuing when they meet their female counterparts and attempt to win them over. It is visually exciting with up to fourteen characters dancing and interacting on the screen at the same time, the technical achievement of this film is no small achievement. Along with the accurate portrayal of post World War II military men and women it was very relatable for many with a strong effect on American values and morals of the time.

After World War II ended, wealth and peace began to erode the public's desire for lighthearted, escapist movie musicals. The popularity of musical movies flows and ebbs with the changing times. Today's audiences have trouble with suspending disbelief with a character breaks into song and dance. Fortunately almost all of the great Hollywood musicals of the past are still available on DVD or VHS for people to enjoy over and over again. Nowadays MTV has replaced MGM as the home place of musical stars. But the happily innocent spirit that made movies musicals special can never be duplicated.

Let me state that utopia is the desire for a better way of being and entertainment has the ability to evoke that feeling of utopia. Entertainment responds to real needs but in a manner that shows what solutions feel like, and how narrative is secondary to the entertainment value of songs and dance. Another aspect that could have been explored is the fact that some may say musical films are beginning to rise in popularity again, with the turn of the economic tide since 2008 many films have been adapted from Broadway shows. For example; *Mamma Mia, Phantom of the Opera, Sweeny Todd* and *Hairspray* to name but a few. These films gross well at the box office because peoples spirits need to be lifted up in an economic down turn.

The conclusions that have discovered throughout this thesis are that during the Great Depression in the 1940's citizens of America needed the fantasy world of musical films more than they did in the 1950's although many may have still wanted the genre to stay alive, it was the cultural phenomenon of the Eisenhower era with the greatest long-term impact was the advent of rock 'n' roll. In the mid-1950's, black and white music blended into a robust new hybrid. Rock drew on the culture of

alienation as well as the increased buying power and sense of identity of the nation's young people who would grow up to represent the new and improved American Dream.

While it is impossible to know exactly how audiences of 1950's America felt, this study has attempted to find areas of special interest throughout the decade with the movies that are analysed. But the main conclusion I have come to is that the subject matter of this thesis I hold very dear; the movies we watch, songs we sing, and people we admire will live on for generations to come.

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