

Class 4: Two Annies

A. Same Name, Different Show

1. Class title 1 (Scene from *Annie Live!*)

With Rossini, Offenbach, and early musicals like *Anything Goes*, we have been looking at Farce: the comedy of complex situations, disguises, larger-than-life villains, and spunky heroes or heroines. Most of them are also Romances; they end when Boy gets Girl. But these fast-paced pieces have little time for Sentiment. Many of the Broadway works I might have chosen in a similar vein are things I showed last semester, so I picked instead the 1977 musical *Annie* by **Charles Strouse** (1928–2025). But the moment I started watching the 1982 film—the stage version had not yet arrived—I began to wonder. Here’s how it begins. Tell me what you think are its salient qualities. The singer is **Aileen Quinn**.

2. Strouse: *Annie* (film 1982), “Maybe”

3. — still from the above

What comes over to you from that? It is a surprisingly dark opening for an upbeat musical, isn’t it? But then, the historical trajectory of the musical is from the dark days of the Depression into the New Deal and some kind of hope, so *Annie* could hardly have started upbeat—but it’s certainly not **Farce**. Annie’s Cinderella story is a kind of romance, but the show does not contain any of the traditional Boy/Girl **Romance**, as we shall see. What it does have, in spades, is **Sentiment**. The number, the orphanage setting, the other little girls, are all there for pathos; the thing is a blatant tear-jerker.

4. — the same with labels: Farce, Sentiment, Romance?

So I realized I would have to look more closely at these three things. And to do so, I decided to expand my focus and look at more than this one show.

5. Section title A (Same Name, Different Shows)

Just over 30 years before *Annie* premiered in 1977, as it happens, there was a Broadway show in 1946 with a very similar title: *Annie Get Your Gun* by **Irving Berlin** (1888–1989). Actually, the similarities are closer than the coincidence in titles. Both are about girls who find themselves over the course of the show. The main difference is in the ages: **Orphan Annie** is, and remains, an 11-year-old; **Annie Oakley** begins as a teenager and grows up. Anyway, it occurred to me that, if I could compare the two and sample some other shows along the way, I could mention a few of the many changes that took place on Broadway over these three decades. Let’s turn to the first number in *Annie Get Your Gun* when Annie sings alone, the song “Doin’ what comes naturally.” Once again, I’ll start with the film, which was made in 1950—but I’ll show it in the original casting with **Judy Garland** in the title role. However, Judy was too

hard to work with, so they fired her and remade her scenes with **Betty Hutton** in the role. You might be interested to compare the two.

6. Berlin: *Annie Get Your Gun*, film, “Doin’ what comes naturally” (Garland)
7. Berlin: *Annie Get Your Gun*, film, “Doin’ what comes naturally” (Hutton)
8. — stills from the above

Set aside how old you know the real Annie Oakley must have been, or the ages of the actual actresses (28 and 29), what would you think is the **behavioral age** of Annie in each? To me, the Garland character is in her mid-teens, and clearly older than her siblings. but Hutton seems directed and costumed to appear just like one of the kids. I wonder why? Why did the entire production concept shift in the matter of a month? It is an interesting decision, as Annie Oakley is seen in the very next number, “You can’t get a man with a gun,” as a young woman old enough to lament her lack of success with men.

9. Berlin: *Annie Get Your Gun*, film, “You can’t get a man with a gun”
10. Sass or Sentiment?

In Hollywood at the time, and perhaps still now, there were two modes for kids: **Sass** and **Sentiment**. *Annie*, the first musical to have a female child actor in the leading role, keeps reverting to Sentiment as its go-to mode, as we shall see, though she shows plenty of sass also. But it is not a romance; in fact it is remarkable by how completely it plays that element down. But *Annie Get Your Gun* is different. It plays the feisty card for all it is worth, starting with the familiar trope of the sassy kid, and avoiding Sentiment for all its worth. Yes, it *is* a romance: Annie Oakley *does* eventually get her man with a gun—rival sharpshooter **Frank Butler**, played by **Howard Keel**. But even at the eleventh hour, in their duet “Anything you can do, I can do better,” any hint of romance is banished by their one-upmanship. It is a funny scene, made more so by Irving Berlin’s cleverness with the words, which he matches with equal cleverness in the music.

11. Berlin: *Annie Get Your Gun*, film, “Anything you can do, I can do better”
12. *No, No, Nanette*, LP cover

Bear with me a moment while we try a little experiment. Here is the first minute of the hit number from *No, No, Nanette*, the 1925 musical by **Vincent Youmans** (1898–1946). Other the costumes of this production from Australia, what makes this sound as though we have entered a time-warp? And a more difficult one: Is it comedy, or is it romance?

13. Youmans: *No, No, Nanette*, “Tea for two”
14. *No, No, Nanette*, LP cover (repeat)

Time-warp? Certainly: listen to the words and the attitude they convey: he goes to the office, she bakes the cake. Interwar musicals virtually banished the whole idea of romantic numbers like this; they are sappy, and they slow down the plot. Comedy or romance? Before putting this down to dated words and attitudes, you have to ask if the writers (or perhaps even the characters) *knew* they were dated, even then. I think they did; it works as romance, but as parody also; the words are just a little too good to be true. And this is my point: with a very few exceptions, Broadway has always been leery of romantic

feeling. It offsets it with cleverness or comedy—or sassiness, as happens again and again with *Annie Get Your Gun*. Or it avoids it altogether, as it does in *Annie*, replacing romantic sentiment with sentiment of a different kind. Let's test this theory with a show that you might consider the epitome of Romance: *My Fair Lady* by **Alan Jay Lerner** (1918–86) and **Frederick Loewe** (1901–88), which premiered in 1956.

15. Poster for *My Fair Lady*

B. Avoidance Strategies

16. Section title B (*My Fair Lady* poster split up)

Avoiding romance? How can I say that? Isn't romantic elegance is the keynote of *My Fair Lady*, a Cinderella story in which a Cockney flower girl, **Eliza Doolittle**, is groomed to enter high society? It contains at least two love songs; in the 1964 movie, both begin on the street where she lives. The first one is indeed called just that, "On the street where you live." One of the hits of the show, it is sung by **Freddy Eynsford-Hill**, a young man whom she meets at Ascot. The other is hardly a love-song at all; it is sung by Eliza's mentor and tormentor, **Professor Henry Higgins**, after she has packed up and left him. Let's compare them. The singers are **Jeremy Brett** and (if you can call him a singer) **Rex Harrison**.

17. Loewe: *My Fair Lady*, "On the street where you live"

18. Loewe: *My Fair Lady*, "I've grown accustomed to her face"

19. — stills from the above

What did you think? Broadway musicals, and the European operettas that preceded them have always had an element of romance. But straight romance always runs the risk of **sentiment**. It is interesting to see the various techniques composers have found to sidestep this. "You're the top" in *Anything Goes*, for instance, is duet sung by one friend (**Reno Sweeney**) to another who does not return her love, but the sheer cleverness of the words completely negates any sentiment; the same is true of Reno's earlier song, "I get a kick out of you." We can see the attraction growing between **Annie Oakley** and **Frank Butler**, but her gaucheness coupled with Berlin's cleverness renders sentiment impossible. "On the street where you live" is a true love song, but it is sung to an empty street and only by a secondary character. When a major character tries to express his feelings, he can hardly articulate the words, let alone carry a tune. We may laugh at **Rex Harrison's** lack of singing voice—but can you imagine this number sung by, say, **Howard Keel**? Or by this singer here (I'll leave you to guess!)?

20. Loewe: *My Fair Lady*, "I've grown accustomed to her face" (Andy Williams)

Any guesses? That was **Andy Williams**. Taken way out of context and with a totally different orchestration, it works, because it is a good tune. [This was one thing Broadway composers learned to do: write songs that worked one way in the context of the show, but could also be taken out of context and be covered as standalones by the hit singers of the day.] Lerner and Loewe may not have wanted

overt sentiment to play a major part in *My Fair Lady*—George Bernard Shaw wanted it even less in his original play *Pygmalion*—but nonetheless sentiment had entered the Broadway repertoire by mid-century, and writers continued to find ways to offset it. [There are, of course, exceptions, one of which is *West Side Story* (1957), which has at least two love duets that are not treated ironically at all—but both are implicit in the original Shakespeare, and probably Bernstein and Sondheim felt that the overall violence of the context was offset enough.]

21. Brett, Harrison, Holloway

One more song from *My Fair Lady*. Neither Freddy nor Higgins ends up getting married in either the musical or the play, although Shaw suggests that Eliza will probably end up with Freddy. But there is one actual wedding: Eliza's father, the dustman **Alfred P. Doolittle**, played by the English comedian **Stanley Holloway**, who has come into money and now needs to make his liaison with Eliza's mother respectable. He too has a song, but it is as *anti*-Romantic as could be, as we see him boozing it up on his wedding day in "Get me to the church on time."

22. Loewe: *My Fair Lady*, "Get me to the church on time"

C. It's Showbiz!

23. Section title C ("Comedy tonight")

I started by asking what happened to Farce. The larger-than-life character who makes romantic advances in a totally *anti*-romantic way is a staple of Farce; think of the Viceroy in *La Périchole*. Or listen to **Miles Gloriosus** from *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962) by **Stephen Sondheim** (1930–2021); the singer in this film version is **Leon Greene**.

24. Sondheim: *Forum*, film, Miles Gloriosus

25. *Forum* poster and title ("Farce")

I said that Farce as an organizing principle had almost disappeared from postwar Broadway. Not quite; *Forum* is the big exception. Sondheim wrote it as a deliberate throwback to the older style, basing it on the Roman plays of **Titus Macchius Plautus** (254–184 BCE), the man who virtually invented Farce. Situation comedy, sight gags, and punchlines, they're all here. Hence my label. But Farce is not its only quality; from the start, *Forum* acknowledges that it is a show in a theater; it is a show in fact *about* theater. Here is part of the opening number, "Comedy Tonight," with **Nathan Lane**.

26. Sondheim: *Forum*, "Comedy tonight"

27. *Forum* poster and title ("Showbiz")

Broadway has always been fascinated by musicals whose subject is show business itself—think of *Kiss Me Kate*, *Gypsy*, *Follies*, and *A Chorus Line*. And *Annie Get Your Gun*—admittedly not Broadway showbiz

on this occasion, but Show Business nonetheless. The energy and artificiality of Showbiz, where nothing is real unless you want it to be, also makes the perfect strategy for circumventing the romance trap. And for *Annie Get Your Gun*, Berlin wrote the iconic tribute: “There’s no business like show business.”

28. Berlin: *Annie Get Your Gun*, “There’s no business like show business”

29. Class title 2 (“And now for ANNIE...”)

D. Out of the Depression

30. Section title D (Out of the Depression)

Is *Annie* a tear-jerker trading in pathos? Is it a comedy like others we’ve seen? I think it is simply easiest to call it a fable, going back to the time of the Depression, but using it as a parallel to our own time. I am mainly going to play selections from *Annie Live!*, a stage production mounted during COVID for broadcast on NBC. I’ll play a fairly long chunk from Act One, though replacing many of the dialogue scenes with short summaries. But because I like so many others got to know *Annie* from the 1982 movie with Albert Finney, whose opening I have already shown, I will intersperse the live production with a couple of scenes from the movie, just so you can see the difference between the two aesthetics. Let’s start with the first ensemble sequence from the movie: “It’s the hard-knock life.”

31. Strouse: *Annie* (movie, 1982), “It’s the hard-knock life”

32. — still from the above

Those girls are certainly cute, and veteran director John Huston does all he can to fill the screen with action, going upstairs and downstairs and all over the house. But look how much more effective the number is when confined to the space on a stage and not diluted by such a large set. I’ll precede it with some dialogue, just so as we get at least a glimpse of the orphanage keeper, Miss Hannigan, played by **Taraji P. Henson**.

33. Strouse: *Annie Live!*, “It’s the hard-knock life”

34. — still from the above

Annie (**Celina Smith**) hides in the laundry basket and gets out. She encounters a stray dog which she calls Sandy, and sings the iconic number in the show, “Tomorrow.” I think it wanders around a bit before it gets to the refrain, but those last two lines are terrific. I’ll cut the dialogue in which she persuades a cop that the dog is hers, and then transition immediately to the next scene, which shows a group of previously-affluent folks, now made homeless by the Depression, and living in a group of makeshift shelters ironically known as Hooverville. It is one of the occasional pieces of social commentary in the show, but I think it has real bite. The 1982 movie omits it entirely.

35. Strouse: *Annie Live!*, “Tomorrow” and Hooverville

36. — still from the above

Of course Annie is recaptured and returned to Miss Hannigan, who punishes her. But she is interrupted by the arrival of **Grace Farrell (Nicole Scherzinger)**, secretary to billionaire **Oliver Warbucks**, who wants to borrow an orphan for Christmas to enhance his public image. Seeing Miss Hannigan's mistreatment of the girl, Grace insists that she be the one to go. So we see them arriving at the Warbucks mansion, which is the first big production number in the show.

37. Strouse: *Annie Live!*, arrival at the Warbucks mansion

38. — still from the above

Grand though that was, I'll give you just the last minute and a half of the film version, so that you can see how much the film version exceeds it. But the comparison I really want you to make comes 15 minutes later, after Oliver Warbucks (**Albert Finney**) has arrived home and had several mostly bad-tempered encounters with Annie, buys out the evening showing at Radio City Music Hall to get her out of the house, but is won over enough so that she can cajole him into coming too. The Radio City visit is a new number, "Welcome to the movies," written for the film. After the Rockettes have performed, they show a film—*Camille*, MGM's 1937 version of the *La Traviata* story; Annie is enthralled, but falls asleep, and Warbucks carries her home.

39. Strouse: *Annie* (movie), end of Warbucks mansion scene

40. Strouse: *Annie* (movie), Radio City Music Hall

41. — stills from the above

Why did the people at MGM make those choices? Self-advertisement, in part. To emphasize Warbucks' wealth? To bring in a touch of Romance—given that Warbucks' eventual realization that he is in love with Grace is as close as we will ever get to romance in this show? But personally, I find the music uninteresting, and the combination of wanton plutocracy and sentimental tear-jerking to be rather distasteful, especially compared with *NYC*, the equivalent number in the stage original, which is a splendid example of Broadway's tribute to Broadway (complete with a cameo for a character called only **Star-to-Be**, and a production number that works splendidly onstage without ever having to be literal about it. Here it is in the 2021 revival, with **Harry Connick Jr.** as Warbucks.

42. Strouse: *Annie Live!*, NYC sequence

43. Class title 3 (still from the above)