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Transportation, Transformation and Utopia in Musicals

The article pursues the idea that means of transportation, and the way vehicles and vessels are brought to use in a number of musicals, can be seen as mediating between the present and the future. The author argues that they function as both symbolic and concrete tools for the audience to experience what Jill Dolan has pointed to as a revised understanding of utopia in the theatre. Using a range of examples and drawing also on Richard Dyer's work on utopian elements in classic musicals, the author investigates the nature of this process and its affinity to the idea of the transformative power of theatre, put forward by Erika Fischer-Lichte. Michael Eigtved is Associate Professor in the Department of Arts and Cultural Studies at the University of Copenhagen.

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Musicals and means of transportation

In popular musical theatre there are numerous examples of means of transportation that are either seen on stage or cited in music and sound. Moreover, when they appear, they very often hold a special significance and may thus be regarded as meta-expositions of distant locations and their potential. The entertainment ship in *Show Boat* (1927), the cow train in *Oklahoma!* (1943), the gently sliding gondola in *Phantom of the Opera* (1986) and the swirling helicopter in *Miss Saigon* (1989) are all vehicles representing the possible or actual move of the characters towards new locations. These locations (and often also the transport leading to them) could dialectically be seen to represent both possibilities and obstacles, while the vehicles (whether represented physically or symbolically) establish a meta-space filled with positive potential – albeit a potential that is also often connected to risk, danger or fateful moments. For an audience, this dramaturgical element opens up a wide range of involvement. Depending on the historic contexts, the kind of narrative involved, interests, gender, age, ethnic affiliations, and references, audience members may identify with the particular means of transportation, project upon it, or just experience it

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as alluding to the future. In many performances, vehicles and transportation may thus be that specific theatrical element that represents an opening towards utopian possibilities.

In such cases, the presence of vehicles may therefore provide the crucial connection between destination and destiny. Similarly, translocation may be the key to transformation of the characters' social situations, or their mental or cultural conditions, thus providing the bridge to a utopian (and currently absent) place. Indeed, through this specific relation to vehicles and transportation, the theatre audience may actually come one step closer to that (better) place, simply through sharing this moment.

This argument can be substantiated with the insights of theatre scholar, Jill Dolan, who in her book *Utopia in Performance* (2005), writes with regard to utopia and the theatre experience, that:

> live performance provides a place where people come together, embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting intimations of a better world.[1]

Although Dolan deals with performances that are quite different to mainstream musicals, she develops the idea that it is possible: "to find, at the theatre, a way to reinvest our energies in a different future, one full of hope and reanimated by a new, more radical humanism."[2] Based on my interpretation of Dolan, in this article utopia will mean this 'idea of a better world,' and will be entirely dependent both on the context of the theatrical situation it is part of, as well as on the individual person imagining this 'better world.' So, it is a very open idea of utopia that I will be pursuing in the relationship between vehicles, transportation, and translocation in popular musical theatre.

One could perhaps argue that many musicals do not expose what Dolan refers to as radical humanism, especially mainstream musicals, which are often reactionary and materialistic. In this article, however, I will bring forward examples of how a specific kind of humanism is also present in a number of musical theatre shows. My viewpoint is informed by Dolan's general idea that it is in the essence of being present in the theatre as a member of an audience that the utopian element of theatre performances lies. As she states, what can be pursued is:

> the potential of different kinds of performance to inspire moments in which audiences feel themselves allied with each other, and with a broader, more capacious sense of a public, in which social discourse articulates the possible, rather than the insurmountable obstacles to human potential.[3]

My interpretation of Dolan's idea governs my critical examination of the examples discussed in this article, in particular the notion that we as an audience, through the influence of a performance (which is simultaneously governing our experience in a specific direction), feel part of a shared public experience. Through our membership of the enclosed community in the auditorium, we experience the

possibility to articulate human potential, which is what Dolan sees as the material that actually may realise utopia. I contend that this means that not only the kind of performances Dolan mentions, but also mainstream musicals may have this potential. When they offer a scenario of a future (be it realised, symbolic, or imagined) through the presence of vehicles, mainstream musicals also possess the capacity to make space for utopia, in the sense that the communal experience of the performance also articulates human potential.

In Richard Dyer's classic essay *Entertainment and Utopia,*[4] a similar idea is presented, albeit (again) for other reasons. When Dyer claims that he will investigate the notion of 'entertainment as entertainment,' not as something else, he is articulating a viewpoint not often brought forward on popular culture, but one that deserves a renaissance, and which could be brought to good use in this case of musicals and transportation. This article will thus be using the term 'mainstream musical' (parallel to the way Dyer uses the term 'entertainment' in a generalist way), to investigate the experience of performances that typify the genre's prevalent characteristics.

The contemporary popular musical theatre stage is a much more diverse and pluralistic one than a few decades ago as suggested, for instance, by Stacy Wolf's work on the development of musicals from a feminist perspective.[5] My points are developed on a generalised notion of 'musicals,' which is a term that needs profound reservations. There is, however, a large body of mainstream musicals that form the backbone of the repertoire of major theatres around the world and that have a substantial amount of genre conventions in common. Thus, I dare to simplify the material in order to make another kind of point: that seen from the audience's side, it is perhaps the act of 'audiencing' that provides the possibility to experience utopia, and the performance itself merely provides the specification of the utopia in question. In addition, that specification may meaningfully be quantified into those genre conventions that are the most widespread and commonly accepted. I do, however, underline that it is a simplification, and that precautions to false conclusions must be taken.

The development of the musical as a genre may, very roughly, be divided into large periods defined by some typical characteristics. In this article I will be referring to shows originating from two of these periods, the first of which is the 'Golden Age' (1927-1968), from *Show Boat* to *Hair*. The main characteristics of this period are heterosexual, romantic plots evolving around main characters originating from very different social and cultural backgrounds, and their struggles with the reconciliation of their socio-cultural differences through a love story, that inevitably results in marriage (or at least the merging of lives), which is presented as the happy end of the show. [6] Ethan Mordden captures this significant period as a:

> Golden Age, because the culture was smart and the musical its smartest popular form. It [the musical] was universal in appeal yet sophisticated, coaching the imagination, independent, even subversive. It preached on such texts as racial tolerance and pacifism even while entertaining.[7]

The other period begins in 1968 with *Hair*, which institutionalised a new narrative trend as the backbone of many subsequent musicals. Central to shows of this period is the tragic hero and their quest for their own, or their community's happiness. In most instances this results in the death or disappearance of the hero, an event that propels the story towards a tragic end. The previous period's traditional utopian happy endings of integration are replaced by post-modern disintegration and open ends. This period has its heyday in the 1980s and 1990s with the mega-musicals of Andrew Lloyd Webber and Boublil & Schönberg (*Les Miserables* 1986, *Miss Saigon* 1989). It ends in the late 1990s when this dominating musical formula is finally contested on Broadway and the West End, giving way to a much more diverse field, with numerous variations of plots, narratives, ideological currents, and new musical styles.[8]

Alongside these formulated, schemata-bound shows there are, of course, lots of musicals that do not fit this description. Such simplification is challenged by the American works of Kurt Weil, the amazing oeuvre of Stephen Sondheim and many more. Because of the overwhelming amount of shows that have been produced in the mould of the above-mentioned genre characteristics, it does make sense, I hope, to apply the commonly accepted notion of what a 'musical' mostly is. My general points about means of transportation are therefore derived from looking at the large number of shows made within the same genre framework and its narrative structures.

Musicals have a value in their own right; they create a certain kind of theatre experience in which theatrical expressions are exchanged on many levels; they address the senses and activate both physical and emotional reactions as well as intellectual reflections. They may put forward a significant statement about what the world looks like through the specific lens they offer, and people attending a musical may actually leave the theatre with a new view of the world, sparked by the specificity of the experience. Again, they certainly provide an occasion for being an audience, and in turn, according to Dolan, provide the potential for shared humanism.

Hence, the utopian element is present not in the consumption of the product, but in the potential of the experience. As Dolan suggests, crucial in this experience are the characteristics also stressed by Dyer in his schematic analysis of musical movies of the 1930s to 1950s, that include energy, abundance, intensity, transparency, and community.[9] The following first part of my argument will therefore combine Dolan's idea of a utopian potential with Dyer's breakdown of the classical musical into essences, in order to investigate the crux of my argument: means of transportation and the possibility of translocation are valid markers for a non-escapist idea of utopia in musical theatre. I will pursue this idea not to prove it as a general denominator of the genre, but to identify this as a significant feature of many musicals, and investigate its manifestation in various aspects, forms and features in a wide range of performances.

Moving and movement

Many mainstream book musicals are that kind of theatre where big emotions like love, hate, anger and fear are the main drivers. The performances are purposely designed to touch and move the audience, perhaps even make us cry – the latter when we are specifically talking about the pop operas of the 1980s and 1990s. Nevertheless, there is another side to musicals when it comes to the concept of moving: they very often depict people who are on the move, physically as well as mentally. Progress, in the sense of changing circumstances and the reactions to this, is of course very often the kernel of any drama. In many musicals from the periods specified above, progress is frequently combined with characters who have their eyes strictly on the target so to speak, whether the target is cultural and/or social acceptance, or the lonely striving for justice, personal possibilities, or community values in the post-1968 period.

In the title song from Rodgers & Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!*, the frontier process in the territories is hailed through spelling the name of the new state and singing it in the rhythm of the onrushing steam train. The story of the show is, in short, a love story between the farmer's daughter Laurey and the cowboy Curly. They obviously represent the two opposing interests in the development of the western part of the United States at the turn of the 20th century, the story being set in 1906 in a small town in what was then known as Indian Territory, now part of Oklahoma. Throughout *Oklahoma!* there is tension between the free and unbound life of the cowboy who is the embodiment of a frontier hero, and the calm order of rural small-town virtues, including the circular and ritual-bound structure of a farmer's life. In the scene where the title song appears, we have just witnessed the long-awaited marriage of the two lovebirds, and now the crowd attending the ceremony breaks into the song. In a way, the song encapsulates more than one theme of prosperity and utopia. The words praise the establishment of a new state, with advantages in the sense of administrative order, normalisation, and regional identity making: "we know we belong to the land, and the land we belong to is grand!" they sing joyfully. In some instances, the end notes of the phrases actually resemble the cowboy's shout at the cows, thus including and respecting the importance of past ways of living. At the same time, by spelling the new state's name, the song underlines the importance of the kind of civilisation, based on education, that is needed for the new state to come into being.

All of these ideas are underpinned by the rhythm of the music. In the characteristic triplets resembling the sounds of the wheels and the steam engine on a train, the name of the state is being sung. However, we have been told a number of times (most notably in the song simply called 'Kansas City') that the train takes cows and people away and into the big town, where, as the song describes, the modern world is – with all its skyscrapers, theatres, and bodily pleasures! So even here, when we are in the early days of the new state and the small community is being founded on values such as austerity, respect, and care, the naming of the state includes a vehicle that – depending on your viewpoint – may take you to that utopian place, the modern city, where everybody has "gone about as far as they can go!" The steam train, a strong symbol of development and

progress of the 19th century, and the mechanism that brought civilisation and prosperity to the new land, is now (when used in a 1943 show to depict a 1906 situation) also the bridge to modernity for the people living in a society governed by slightly archaic patterns – or so it would look to an audience in 1943.

Dyer proposes energy, abundance, intensity, transparency, and community as the concepts central to the idea of the musical.[10] All of these elements could be said to be present in Oklahoma!'s title song, with the energy of the crowd singing together; the abundance of the land, producing so much that it makes sense to build a town right there; the intensity of the moment when the marriage is actually being realised; and the transparency of the interests involved from both settlers and cowboys. The whole point of the song is to establish a sense of community, both in an individual sense by marriage and through the collective efforts of the people. Utopia, however, almost becomes an obstacle for the project, since the big city lures good men and woman away from their duties and offers a new kind of abundance. Perhaps Dyer's concepts may even be more present in the utopian representation of the big city, to which the symbolic train will take whoever wishes to go.

A show within the dramaturgical frameworks of the post-1968 period would very often be driven by developments in the personal pursuits of the hero, be it of romance, prosperity or larger causes, such as Jean Valjean's striving for justice for the poor in *Les Miserables* (1986). This show provides an interesting example of a symbolic use of vehicles: at a certain point in the performance Valjean must stop his flight from the brutal police inspector, Javert, and use his tremendous physical power to lift a broken carriage off a poor man's legs, thereby saving the man, but exposing himself to the risk of being captured (which he eventually is). This carriage – unable to drive, unable to fulfil its original purpose – is what stops him from fulfilling his quest, and the direct connection between the vehicle, its basic idea, and the dramaturgical progression is established. However, this also serves as an example of the complexity of the idea of regarding means of transportation as vehicles for a utopian experience. Valjean is initially escaping justice, since he robbed a priest after being released, penniless, from prison. He committed an act of violence, and no matter how understandable this act may seem, we – the audience – recognise him as a potentially dangerous, unscrupulous man. The next part of the show then depicts Valjean transforming himself into a man of honour by earning the trust of his fellow citizens when he becomes a respected factory owner and mayor of the town. By putting his past behind him, albeit through denial and covering up, Valjean builds a fragile and, as we – the audience – can see, an unsustainable utopia for himself. Because his past catches up with him, and (in the sequence described above) the broken cart does not represent the gateway to a possible utopia, in its brokenness it instead represents the impossibility of Valjean's quest to leave behind his past deeds and transform into a decent man, living in what would be his idea of utopia: a place where he is not marked by his criminal past but is valued for his present actions. But as the cart is broken, so are Valjean's hopes for the fulfilment of this dream.

The means of transportation, the vehicle itself, is crucial for both the dramatic developments and the character's specific possibilities to reach the place

– the geography, if you like – where the potential for a better life resides. In the words of Algirdas Greimas' actantial model, the vehicles can act as structural elements, both as helpers and as opponents, and thereby become intimately connected with the object for the quest, in this case, a utopian place.[11]

To summarise, moving and movement are in many ways what produces the meaning of the project in musicals, although the hope of utopia, expected to lie at the end of the travel, is of course what fuels the dramatic machinery during the process. However, in many cases it is the united efforts of getting things moving that is the basic value-making element in the story, as well as in the audience experience. The utopian notion in mainstream musicals, running as a broad stream through many shows, is among other elements enhanced by this presence of (metaphorical) transportation, movement and re-location. It can be understood in connection with other (and comparable) dramaturgical elements, for instance the typical Act 1 Finale, where in many musicals 'somebody' is 'going somewhere,' escaping around the corner from the police whistle in *West Side Story* (1957), or joining in with the marching masses in 'Do You Hear the People Sing,' heading for the revolutionary barricades in *Les Misérables*. The processes of moving itself, and of movement towards an absent place are thus important elements in the dramaturgy of many mainstream musicals.

Utopian destinations in classic musicals

In the mid-twentieth century Broadway musical tradition – between *Oklahoma!* (1943) and *Hair* (1968) – it is frequently a bourgeois dream of moving upwards in the social and cultural hierarchy that at first sight is carrying the plot. For example, Annie in *Annie Get Your Gun* (1946) wants to be the best rifle shooter, Eliza in *My Fair Lady* (1956) wants to be able to work in a flower shop, and Maria in *The Sound of Music* (1959) wants to have a family. On the surface, this is all quite *petit bourgeois* and part of the 'American dream' of moving up the ladder.

But if we take away the specific dreams in the stories, which often reflect hetero-normative, liberal thinking of the time when the musical was written, and look at the structural elements, we might just consider these musicals to expose exactly what Jill Dolan advocates: a possibility to have a place, where we – as an audience – can find a way to reinvest our energies in a different future. The outset of most classical musicals is traditional social and cultural order, and the idea of the show is to rock that order, to represent the battle between forces of conservatism and rebellion, finally reaching the promise of a new equilibrium, and a new-found land. When gamblers and Salvation Army girls in *Guys and Dolls* (1950) unite, after flying to Cuba to party (!), the airfare enables them to let courage and joy, rather than hustling and blissfulness, govern their relations.

Maybe – at least seen from a contemporary perspective – the new lands of classic musicals still seem reactionary and restraining, but at their time, the promise of the life that could be led in these new, utopian, societies was golden. It was actually still utopian when Annie got her gun and shot down Frank Butler's pride in 1946, but by showing it on stage (in a travelling Wild West Circus), the audience were shown that utopia was also a possibility right there in the theatre.

My suggestion is, therefore, that there are some elements in these musicals, produced within this specific framework of the genre as it appears in the mainstream shows of the classic era, which make it valid to see vehicles and transportation as general markers of utopian places. However, it is necessary to reflect on the various relations to historic contexts that must be taken into consideration.

Firstly, there is the historic development of vehicles and means of transportation, and the industrial development of the mechanical devices involved. A 1950s show depicting airplane travelling (as in the previously mentioned *Guys and Dolls*) is of course closely related to its own time, when commercial aviation was booming, and a plane trip was no longer reserved for the very rich. However, this is about realism; it is plausible that in 1950 gamblers would book a flight, but the basic idea that they all move to an exotic destination does not depend on the specific means of transportation. The air travel makes the show contemporary in its own time, but the establishment of a utopia could also have been made possible by way of a horse drawn carriage.

Secondly, there is the historic anchorage of certain symbolic means of transportation: the horse-drawn carriage always refers to a time before steam and combustion engines were the preferred propellants; the jet plane is always a post-WW2 time marker. There is an element of nostalgia in musicals, which also affects the use of transportation: more often than not, musicals are set in historical contexts quite remote from their audiences' own period of time. So, one may prioritise the element of, for instance, nostalgic romanticism in a scene depicting people riding in a carriage over the fact that they are actually also transporting themselves. The function, both dramaturgically and functionally, may be hidden behind the sheer joy of the ride (as the audience experiences it.)

These observations lead me to some remarks on the theatrical element of time and history. The audience must relate to both their own time and, more often than not, to the historic period depicted in the show. During performance, the audience relates – as in the above-mentioned horse and carriage example – to both horse-drawn carriages as a symbolic element, as a practical feature of both the story and the situation, and (probably even less consciously) to transportation as a phenomenon. So, for interpretations to be valid (also throughout this article) in terms of the specific meaning of transportation (as well as the means for it), they must always be considered in relation to different kinds of historic contextualisations.

The means of transportation in musicals often become the link between history, contemporary everyday life and its conditions, and that utopian place of the future where people live, more true and equal, than they do in the society in which the action on stage is set. Utopian places in musicals are often not physical, they are visions, states of mind, or imagined places. However, pursuit of the visions is made possible by the various means of transportation, and the natures of the utopias are given some kind of material representation by the specific vehicle used for the movement.

Means of transportation as mediators

The vehicle itself becomes at the same time specific and abstract; it becomes a symbol of potential change, as well as the actual instrument for it. The many different means of transportation become loaded with meaning and energy, endowing the characters with potentials and possibilities. Possessing or at least having the possibility to use the vehicles is the first move towards a utopian place; the means of transportation are mediators between the present and the possible. And it is a great variety of cars, motorcycles, boats and planes that appear alongside more exotic features such as merry-go-rounds in *Carousel* (1945), roller skates in *Starlight Express* 1984), and broomsticks in *Wicked* (2003). Each means of transportation may be seen in the historical contexts of the period of the production, the period of its creation, and the period depicted in the performance, thus accruing a number of different potential meanings. My point here is that they all have the potential to mediate between a (real) present and a potential utopia. A few examples will clarify this point.

The car in *Grease* (1972) – The Greased Lightning, as it is called – has an almost divine potential for rushing the boys to teen heaven, where there are no pimples, awkwardness, or hostile competitors challenging the fragile self-esteem of a teenager. The car, which is the spare time project of the boys who redecorate and tune it to their taste, mediates between realities and utopia, and it represents the possibility of transformation from slender boys to broad-shouldered men.

Another crucial car, albeit with opposing qualities, is found in Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Sunset Boulevard* (1993). Here, after years of waiting, fading Hollywood star Norma Desmond finally receives a letter summoning her to the studios, only to discover that it is not her, but her classic limousine, that is sought for a period movie. Norma's fame has faded to the same black and white as the movies in which she used to star, yet the vehicle that her success made it possible to acquire has not lost its symbolic value. Her possession of the car nevertheless does not bring her any closer to her utopia – since this is no longer founded in reality. Just as the car is vintage and can no longer compare on even terms with modern cars, it will not bring her to a new place but only back to the starting point.

Not only cars are important vehicles. Actually, there are many means of transportation in musicals. At the extreme end of the scale, in the Cole Porter hit musical *Anything Goes* (1934), a vessel is the location for the story, which takes place on an ocean liner, the SS American. The ship becomes a closed environment for the plot, and since it is located in the open sea for a major part of the performance, nobody, either literally or metaphorically, can avoid his or her destiny or destination. Thus, everybody is without real control over where they are going, just as they are in the story. However, everybody is pursuing happiness and 'the good life' and everybody in the plot relies on the ship to bring them safely to their respective endpoints.

A look at a more unusual example may provide an important nuance to the overall picture of methods of transportation as mediators. When the means of transporting is almost an expansion of the body, a special situation arises, as the

vehicle works both as a dramatic tool and almost as a fetishised object. Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Starlight Express* serves as such a case, since the entire show is performed by actors on roller skates. The story, a classic Cinderella tale, is about trains: essentially whether to put your money on steam, diesel or electricity as the propellant to become the winner of the World Championship. The big fight is between the small, somewhat outdated steam engine Rusty, who is ousted by the slick diesel machine, Greaseball. In the end, of course, Rusty wins, and the old steam locomotive, Poppa, sings to him 'There's a Light at the End of the Tunnel!', thus making it clear to Rusty where to head for Utopia.

The traditional values of striving for the good cause and following your dream (and the divine light) are heavily present. Michael Walsh argues that in spite of its modern appearance *Starlight Express* is a reactionary show: "Sociologically, *Starlight* was regressive: the locomotives were all male – no resistance to their pistons – while the coaches were female." [12] The song 'U.N.C.O.U.P.L.E.D,' a sobbing country ballade, makes a reference (through the spelling structure of the chorus, and the country sound) to *Oklahoma!* and to a longing for utopian happiness similar to the one in Rodgers & Hammerstein's show. Here, however, the song is sung by Dinah (the dining car of the diesel train), who has been dumped by Greaseball after complaining about his cheating in the first heat of the competition. Therefore, the song appears as a reversed version of the idea about spelling 'Oklahoma' in the classic musical. In *Starlight Express*, Dinah is spelling the broken dream of reaching utopia (as opposed to the hopes for the new state in *Oklahoma!*). This reflects the profound breakaway from classic narrative formula brought forth by the new era of musicals post-1968; Dinah's song about being disconnected resonates with post-modernist aesthetics of disunity and fragmentation.

In *Starlight Express,* vehicles also function as their own counterpart to presentations of the way to utopia. The (progressive) diesel trains are not the vehicles by which to reach it, whereas steam (with the attendant nostalgia of steam engines) suddenly appears more like the proper means of transportation to reach utopia; they will eventually reach the light at the end of the tunnel. Thereby *Starlight Express* presents a paradoxical attitude within the show's own narrative frame, where utopia, which is customarily connected to a notion of the future, is reached by way of an outdated form of transportation. The important feature, however, is that the vehicle is the mediator and in both instances forms the connection to the possibility or impossibility of making the transition.

In the original London version, the opening of the show was dominated by the lowering of a giant steel bridge. The bridge connected glass-covered roller skate ramps that ran all the way around the auditorium and enabled the performers to hurl themselves onto the racetrack within a few metres of the audience. The roller skates used were not modern in-liners, but the classic type, resembling those used for ice figure skating, but with wheels instead of blades. Thus, resonances of both nostalgia and futurism were encapsulated in the type of roller skates used. The fact that the main characters themselves are vehicles makes *Starlight Express*' point that you can achieve everything if you really want to – even when all the odds and the technology are against you – it is the vehicle

that is the key to the utopian potential. And it is due to the bodily experience of the performers passing within inches that the audience have the possibility to feel exactly that: the very concrete difference between their own lack of bodily movements when confined to their chairs in the auditorium, and the speed and power of the trains on roller skates, which offer a sense of co-experience of freedom and control, and of being on their way to utopia, right there in the theatre. Dolan's notion of the community feeling as the crucial factor for the utopian experience is here enhanced by the clear division between audience and performers, thus making people in the auditorium even more aware of their position of being exactly that – people together in the auditorium.

The transformative (utopian) potentials of musicals

So where does this lead us? I began arguing, with Jill Dolan, that going to the theatre itself holds the possibility of being presented with, and being part of an experience that Dolan refers to as "intimations of a better world."[13] I hope I have demonstrated how this idea can be extended to types of performances other than those Dolan uses to make her point, and how the specific ways in which transportation and translocation are part of musicals, and may be seen as a link between the actions on stage, a utopian idea of a changed situation, and the audience's own status in this.

When we experience the actual moving of performers on stage, we will, on a phenomenological level, feel and comprehend that movement in ourselves. It is a very hands-on experience of theatrical impact. The distance between the theatrical presentation and the bodies of the audience is short, as for example when the roaring sound of the helicopter and the physical image of the swirling rotor are part of the dramatic final minutes of *Miss Saigon*, depicting the evacuation of Ho Chi Minh City. We are literally within reach of the helicopter and can take part in the experience both intellectually and bodily. The helicopter itself thus becomes the theatrical tool that enables us to partake in the movement towards rescue, towards safety.

In the introduction to Erica Fischer-Lichte's *The Transformative Power of Performance*, Marvin Carlson states the following on this potential of theatre, and defines that we are in:

> a situation in which we have an experience which causes us to gain a new, refreshed comprehension of our own situation of being in the world…[One that] engages the full activity of the human being as an embodied mind.[14]

When exposed to the vehicles on stage, understanding their specific and symbolic potential and experiencing the bodily impact of the situation on us as members of a live audience, Jill Dolan's ideas about the possibility of a future with hope for humanity is actually reinforced, and the utopias are moved one step closer. The specificity of the experience of vehicles and transportation becomes a tool for that transformative power. According to Fischer-Lichte, performance potentially possesses the ability to make the audience review their notion of the world and make them potential actors in their own lives.[15]

The narrative, structure, performative actions, and physical presence of means of transportation in the shows direct the audience towards the certain kind of utopia in question, or rather, point to potential utopias of a specific kind. Dyer's elements – energy, abundance, intensity, transparency and community – interweave with each other in the performance, and experience of these provokes the audience's phenomenological joy of the moment, as well as a potential reflection on the impact of having been present, of having been part of that particular audience, of having experienced movements, been moved, and perhaps even appreciated the push towards moving themselves.

In a world where presence in a vast amount of our waking time means being present online in virtual places, or present through digital transmission of representations of oneself on social media, theatre is a safe place for physical presence. Transportation in the sense of moving your physical body from here to there is a strong, albeit almost archaic, symbolic action. But given the kind of experience this enables, and the contract established between the actions on stage and the audience, it remains a theatrical element as powerful as ever, evoking both the promise of a potentially brighter future elsewhere, and the specific and concrete way to get there – also bodily.

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[1] Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 2.
[2] Ibid, 2.
[3] Ibid, 2.
[4] Richard Dyer, "Entertainment and Utopia," in *Only Entertainment*, 2nd ed., (London: Routledge, 2005), 19.
[5] Stacy Wolf, *Changed for Good* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).
[6] The period has been described by Gerald Bordman, *American Musical Theatre* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). For an elaboration of the socio-cultural aspect see John Bush Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical (*Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2003). An in-depth analysis of the subjects mentioned here appears in Ethan Mordden, *Beautiful Mornin': The Broadway Musical in the 1940s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) and *Coming Up Roses: The Broadway Musical in the 1950s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).
[7] Ethan Mordden, *The Happiest Corpse I've Ever Seen* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).
[8] This development has been treated in Jessica Sternfeld, *The Megamusical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006). For an in-depth analysis of Lloyd Webber's work, see Michael Walsh, *Andrew Lloyd Webber: His Life and Work* (London: Viking, 1989).
[9] Dyer, "Entertainment and Utopia," 21.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Algirdas Greimas, *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1983).
[12] Walsh, *Andrew Lloyd Webber*, 162.
[13] See Note 1.
[14] Erica Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance* (London: Routledge, 2008), 7.
[15] Ibid, 13.