CHAPTER TWELVE

“THE STATUS IS NOT QUO”

Gender and Performance in
Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog

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Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog, co-written by Joss Whedon, his
brothers Zack Whedon and Jed Whedon, and actress Maurissa
Tancharoen, was produced during the 2007–2008 Writers
Guild of America strike. Filmed and recorded at Joss Whedon’s home
and on a small sound stage, the work is a three-act, forty-two-minute film
that was released online over six days—one act for every two days—and
was thereafter made available for purchase from iTunes and for free view-
ing on hulu.com. The team also released an online comic book, “Captain
Hammer: Be Like Me,” introducing the two main male characters and
establishing Captain Hammer’s unintelligent, bigoted superhero persona
through publisher Dark Horse prior to the first-episode release as a teaser
for viewers.¹ Whedon calls Dr. Horrible “your typical internet, superhero
musical,” further noting that, “It’s supposed to define the typical super-
hero musical, by being the first one.”² Dr. Horrible was an instant hit:
the original distribution site crashed because of heavy traffic, and the
soundtrack was number 2 at iTunes USA on the day of its release, later
making it to number 39 on the Billboard 200.³ Whedon sums up the plot
as follows: “It’s the story of Dr. Horrible, a low-rent super villain trying
to make his way in the world, being evil, defeat his nemesis, Captain
Hammer, who beats him up on a weekly basis, and work up the courage
to talk to the prettiest girl walking around.”⁴ For Dr. Horrible, the goal
is, “destroying the status quo, because the status is not quo. The world
This essay examines the use of codes of musical theater, masculinity, and performance as they relate to the superhero genre and to *Dr. Horrible* in particular.

It is no surprise that constructing and performing masculinity is a near-universal element in traditional superhero comic books and films. Batman and Superman are visually depicted as broad, muscular men, and Superman and Spider-Man are frequently put in the position of saving a physically weaker and needy female. Jeffery Brown has written of Superman that, “As his very name makes clear, Superman is the ultimate masculine ideal of the twentieth century. He can fly faster than the speed of light, cause tidal waves with a puff of breath, see through walls, hear the merest whisper from hundreds of miles away, and squeeze a lump of coal in his bare hands with enough pressure to create a diamond. He is intelligent, kind, handsome, and an ever vigilant defender of truth, justice, and the American way.” Indeed, Brown suggests, “Classical comic book depictions of masculinity are perhaps the quintessential expression of our cultural beliefs about what it means to be a man.” What does it mean for such standards of masculinity, then, when the trope of the superhero is transplanted into what is commonly regarded as a primarily gay aesthetic, that of musical theater? As Rebecca A. Rugg has commented, “Is musical theater impossible after gay liberation? Popular culture has digested so many signs of gay culture that it may be impossible to play the signs straight anymore.”

Indeed, attempts to create successful superhero musicals to date have failed. Charles Strouse and Lee Adams’s 1966 *It's a Bird . . . It's a Plane . . . It's Superman* is occasionally resurrected for high school and college shows, but it is considered, by those few individuals who have heard or seen it, a well-intentioned flop with a few good tunes; likewise, the 1998 Warner Bros.-backed *Batman: The Musical* was so riddled with problems that it never even made it to tryouts, despite having popular song composer Jim Steinman and director Tim Burton attached. Although as of the time of this book’s going to press a Spider-Man musical was being prepared with director Julie Taymor and the band U2, and graphic novelist Art Spiegelman and composer Phillip Johnston had completed a first draft of *Drawn to Death: A Three Panel Opera*, which traces the origins of the comic book, the integration of two distinct genres with their own extensive networks of codes and signs remains relatively unproven. The exception is *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog*, which, as I will demonstrate, succeeds as both a
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musical and as a supervillain origin story precisely because it embraces and plays up the ambiguities of masculinity as a defining factor in both genres.

*Dr. Horrible* is designed with camp extravagance in mind. In writing about the queering of comic-book superheroes, Rob Lendrum writes that “camp relies on mimesis to destabilize norms, dethrone seriousness, or create humour. Other more radical theories strive to separate from dominant cultural practices in order to create new, alternative countercultural movements.” By serving as the work’s narrator, Dr. Horrible himself has what Mikko Keskinen calls the “topmost diegetic position,” that of “superior knowledge of the cinematic story and (to a degree) discourse.” Keskinen writes, “[Kaja] Silverman claims that the female voice is closely identified with spectacle and the body, whereas the male voice tends towards invisibility and anonymity; this dichotomy is articulated in Hollywood as the ‘disembodied male voice against the synchronized female voice.’” Yet this is not always the case. Indeed, in *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog*, it is the male voices—those of Horrible and Captain Hammer—that are given primary status and are identified with their bodies and powers, while Penny’s voice—she has just two solo songs, one each in act one and act two, and none in act three—is secondary to the story of the two men whose war of egos ultimately lead to her death; ultimately, she is a mere object in the story of Horrible’s origins as a supervillain.

By using familiar signs and codes from the world of superhero comics and imbuing them with the queer sensibilities of the musical and a non-traditional narrative approach, *Dr. Horrible’s* writers are able to destabilize the norm of the “intelligent, kind” hero as well as that of the stereotypical evildoer with his deep laugh and secret plans. In fact, *Dr. Horrible* begins with sending up just that aspect of the classic supervillain. The first act, or episode, opens with Neil Patrick Harris as Dr. Horrible looking into his webcam and practicing his evil laugh, noting to his viewers that he’s “working with a vocal coach” to make it deeper and richer. He complains that some villains neglect this important element of performance; at once, Dr. Horrible has set up a paradigm of maleness and performance which remain intertwined throughout the work: he admits to performing masculinity through vocalization, although needing to enhance his maculine performance with lessons from a “vocal coach” also situates him as the stereotypical effeminate man of musical theater.
Dr. Horrible’s masculinity is also countered by the domesticity he projects, frequently but not always when he is in the guise of his alter ego, Billy. In the opening sequence, any evil authority he might still have had after admitting to using a vocal coach is undermined when he reprimands superhero Johnny Snow for trying to force a showdown in Duly Park, parentally saying, “There’s kids in that park.” Although Dr. Horrible appears in the manner of the classic mad scientist (particularly that of Lex Luthor in early Superman comics) and is dressed in a steampunk-influenced costume composed of goggles, a dresslike doctor’s coat, and fencing gloves, the combination of his naïve compassion and his transparency in acting on his desires to present himself as more successful and more “manly” than he actually is ends any pretense that he is anything other than the weaker end of the extremes described by Brown:

Indeed, the split personality implied by the concept of a masquerade seems to be one of the most archetypal metaphors for the masculine condition in Western culture. Whether in Jungian psychology or low-budget horror films, great literary works or modern comic books, masculinity has often explored its own duality. The male identity in the twentieth century is perceived in extremes: man or mouse, He-man or 98-pound weakling. At one end is the hyper-masculine idea with muscles, sex appeal, and social competence; at the other is the skinny, socially inept failure.

Billy is depicted in traditionally feminine spheres: doing the laundry, blogging from the kitchen (here two traditionally feminine areas overlap: that of communication and speech and that of the kitchen), and sharing frozen yogurt with his crush, Penny, played by Felicia Day. The musical numbers assigned to Billy are also “feminized” in relation to those sung when he is in the guise of Dr. Horrible through use of musical styles commonly regarded as gendered. His first song, which begins when he is in Dr. Horrible garb answering fan e-mail on his blog, instead primarily features Billy in street clothes, singing in a light tenor:

Laundry day
See you there
Under things
Tumbling
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Wanna say
Love your hair
Here I go
Mumbling

As the song continues, Billy and Dr. Horrible are shown in alteration. Horrible sings about his freeze ray that will stop time, and Billy takes the lyrics that describe his feelings for Penny and his desire to spend more time with her. As the two personas alternate, so does Harris’s vocal presentation, singing with more volume and a richer chest voice for Dr. Horrible, who poses villainously with the freeze ray, and reverting to a lighter timbre and using his head voice for Billy, who continues doing laundry. This first solo and the scene immediately after it establish that while Billy / Dr. Horrible has primarily homosocial relationships—he has a male roommate named Moist, who is a villain henchman—he desires a heterosexual relationship with Penny; but his heretofore homosocial life has not prepared him to speak comfortably with her or approach her as a potential partner. Dr. Horrible also aspires to join the Evil League of Evil, an apparently male-dominated organization represented by a trio of singing (male) cowboys who pass on threats from their leader, Bad Horse: if Dr. Horrible doesn’t come through with a “heinous crime, a show of force / (a murder would be nice of course),” Bad Horse will “make [Horrible] his mare.” The threat additionally serves to position Horrible as the weaker, feminized “bottom” in relation to the presumably more masculine and more successful villains of the Evil League. Further, Horrible’s relationship with his nemesis, whom he terms “Captain Hammer, corporate tool,” is portrayed as exceptionally one-sided, with Horrible always on the receiving end of Captain Hammer’s violence. Despite Horrible’s attempts, especially when he is acting as a supervillain, to perform traditional superhero masculinity or with masculine traits, he is repeatedly shown to be the weaker or more “feminine” of the two men.

In the song “A Man’s Gotta Do,” Captain Hammer (played by Nathan Fillion) is introduced, a muscular man wearing cargo pants, black gloves, and a close-fitting, short-sleeved T-shirt with a hammer on the chest. Dr. Horrible is remotely hijacking a van when Captain Hammer lands on its roof and destroys Horrible’s control device, sending the van careening along city streets and threatening Penny. Horrible manages to
stop the van remotely, but Hammer takes the credit and uses the opportunity to impress Penny. Horrible hates the thought that he has “introduced my arch-nemesis to the girl of my dreams,” but carries on with his heist of the van’s contents. In their trio, Horrible places professionalism above individuality or personal interests, focusing on a successful heist so that Bad Horse will admit him into the Evil League of Evil. At the same time, Hammer uses the event to parade his successfully performed masculinity in front of female spectators and Penny, in the guise of just doing what “he’s gotta do.”

The introduction of the trio is sung by Horrible in a gentle, balladlike style, which is interrupted by Hammer as he lands on the roof of the van. With Hammer’s interruption, the music changes from Horrible’s gentle ballad to a rhythmically and harmonically faster rock style, complete with wailing electric guitars. As Alexandra Apolloni has pointed out, “Rock music has been traditionally viewed as an expression of masculinity”; the appearance of Captain Hammer and his position as both the dominant musical force and the dominant actor in the trio leads to the creation of two disparate performances of masculinity: the solitary, accomplishment-driven Dr. Horrible and the narcissistic, smug Captain Hammer.14 Hammer is the essence of hypermasculinized camp—a term that, as Vanessa Knights has noted, traces its etymological roots to the French se camper, meaning self-conscious posturing.15 Although his entrance begins with a statement of modesty—“Stand back everyone, nothing here to see”—it soon becomes clear that the modesty is false and that the spotlight is exactly what Hammer wants and is, in fact, prepared for:

Just imminent danger, in the middle of it, me
Yes, Captain Hammer’s here, hair blowing in the breeze
And the day needs my saving expertise.

After throwing Penny into a pile of garbage bags to get her out of the way of the van, and the van stops, he continues, above and on top of Penny’s thanks: “When you’re the best, you can’t rest, what’s the use / There’s ass needs kicking, some ticking bomb to defuse / The only doom that’s looming is you loving me to death.” Hammer asserts his masculinity over Horrible’s as Hammer grabs Horrible by the throat, saying, “It’s curtains for
you, Dr. Horrible. Lacy, gently wafting curtains,” assigning Horrible to both physical domination and a feminized death. As Hammer continues to sing and Penny joins in thanking him, he stands with his back to her and ignores her lyrics and performance, instead holding one hand to an ear as if checking his own pitch. Hammer turns to Penny only at the end of the trio, as Horrible makes off with the contents of the van and Penny and Hammer both sing about her love for Hammer.

The trio establishes that Hammer’s masculinity is as much a performance as Horrible’s, although Hammer sincerely believes in his own moral and physical superiority. In the first episode alone, Horrible and Hammer are cast as two sides of a stereotypical masculine persona: Horrible admits feelings of responsibility and a need to appear mature, while Hammer represents the hubris that can accompany physical strength and public support. Although Niall Richardson has written that in traditional comics, “the villains of the superhero narratives always want the exact opposite [of the heroes]: self-aggrandizement and world domination,” these first-act performances of Hammer and Horrible establish that both men seek these ends.¹⁶

Act two opens with a duet between Dr. Horrible and Penny in which Horrible, dressed as Billy, stalking the dark streets of L.A., sings of his desire to take over the world for its own betterment, while Penny, eating dinner with Captain Hammer at a soup kitchen, sings of her equal desire to improve the world, albeit by different means, in “My Eyes.” Although silent, Hammer is shown as a superficial cad, unwilling to interact with or be touched by the homeless diners to whom Penny is dedicated. The music for the duet clearly separates Penny and Horrible’s approaches to changing the world, despite their shared social concerns. His lyrics begin with short, monosyllabic bites set to a marching tempo with a rhythmically repeating, highly percussive, minor-key accompaniment that could be attributed to Philip Glass or Steve Reich. His anger is audible:

Any dolt with half a brain
Can see that humankind has gone insane
To the point where I don’t know
If I’ll upset the status quo
If I throw poison in the water main
The music framing Penny—and by extension, Captain Hammer—follows the same essential harmonic structure as Horrible’s music but is accompanied by a soft-rock background, including a simple bass line on guitar and a shimmer on a cymbal, a sound more common of female pop artists than their male counterparts. Penny’s presence, then, can be read as “feminizing”: each of Horrible’s subsequent verses becomes gradually more lyrical and the accompaniment becomes more similar to hers. After their solo first verses, Horrible and Penny sing together as he watches her from afar while she goes on a date with Captain Hammer. In this second stanza, Horrible’s musical style changes to match hers: his earlier, “masculine,” martial accompaniment is replaced with the soft-rock accompaniment first heard in Penny’s solo stanza, tempering his anger and evening out his projection, and his diction changes from the clipped, angry delivery of his first stanza to a more elided performance, especially as their stanzas begin to end on the same words: “heart,” “sound,” “(a)part,” and “(a/g)round.” Finally, in the final stanza, Horrible’s final verse and Penny’s final verse overlap both textually and musically for all but a few key words:

Dr. Horrible
I cannot believe my eyes
How the world’s filled with filth
and lies
But it’s plain to see
Evil inside of me is on the rise

Penny
I cannot believe my eyes
How the world’s finally growing
wise
And it’s plain to see
Rapture inside of me is on the rise

Horrible’s plan to use the freeze ray for the first time is thwarted by Hammer, who throws a car at his head, and the cowboy envoys of Bad Horse appear again, telling Horrible that “now assassination is just the only way” to enter the Evil League of Evil. Horrible struggles with the concept of murder, telling Moist that, “Killing’s not elegant or creative, it’s not my style.” The concepts of elegance and creativity in relation to his work further cast Horrible into the traditional feminine sphere, and his lack of sexually aggressive masculinity is reinforced during his conversation with Penny at the Laundromat: he speaks to her as a female friend rather than an interested male, offering her yogurt and asking casually about her date with Hammer.

When Hammer tells Horrible of his plans for having sex with Penny, couched in over-the-top tough-guy language (“I’m gonna give Penny the
night of her life, just because you want her. And I get what you want. See Penny’s giving it up, she’s giving it up hard. Cause she’s with Captain Hammer. And these [he raises his gloved fists] are not the hammer. [Pause] The hammer is my penis.”), it sparks Horrible’s most emphatic performance of masculinity in the song “Brand New Day.” “Brand New Day,” which borrows heavily from the form of Sweeney Todd’s “No Place Like London,” opens with a rapid patter over a thumping bass beat as Horrible finds his perfect murder target in Hammer:

This appeared as a moral dilemma ’cause at first
It was weird, though I swore to eliminate the worst
Of the plague that devoured humanity, it’s true
I was vague on the “how”—so how can it be that you
Have shown me the light

The chorus, an aggressively straightforward declaration of hostility, is accompanied by heavy percussion and guitars in the style of pop punk; despite the Sondheim-influenced textual approach, the music is obviously indebted to Green Day and The Offspring.

It’s a brand new day
And the sun is high
All the birds are singing
That you’re gonna die

As Horrible sings, the visuals offer a montage of his various physical beatings by Hammer: in front of tourists taking photos, in the rain, in front of a Salvation Army Santa Claus. Later he is shown sitting in a giant chair, where he looks like a precocious child; finally he imagines himself the giant, stomping through L.A. and squashing Captain Hammer. The implication is obvious: no more “girly” 98-pound weakling for Horrible.

In his performance of “Brand New Day,” Billy’s transformation from “laundry buddy” to Dr. Horrible and his fantasy of towering over everyone—normal citizens and his nemesis alike—is a reminder of the goals and philosophy he expressed in “A Man’s Gotta Do.” Just as Hammer has objectified Penny from the beginning, Horrible now sees her as objectified as well: she is desired by both hero and villain, but only, at this point, because the other also covets her. The visual sequence that accompanies
“Brand New Day” asserts Horrible’s masculinity as ultimately jealous and misogynistic; he is no longer singing about improving the world through his (benevolent) dictatorship, but about destroying another man over a woman. “Brand New Day” signifies a turning point in Horrible’s origin story, one so crucial that the music reappears at the end of act three as the newly outwardly suave and macho Horrible steps into his new role as a member of the Evil League of Evil.

Hammer does not sing at all during the second act. Aside from his dialogue with Penny and Horrible at the Laundromat, he is mute, reduced to two alternating visual tropes that repeatedly depict him as both slightly feminized—he is squeamish and fearful of everyday encounters—and hyper-masculinized, by showing off his powers to Penny. Hammer backs away from the homeless at the soup kitchen and brushes off his shoulder after one man has touched him, and he cringes and moves away from ducks as he and Penny sit by a lake; at the same time, he displays his super-speed and super-strength by paddling a paddleboat at high speeds around the lake, and implies that he has used brute force to make the mayor sign over a building to Penny’s homeless advocacy group. The new trope in act two that displays his occasional inability to perform masculinity prepares the audience for the complete reversal of gender roles between Hammer and Horrible in the final act.

Act three opens with Hammer and Penny preparing for the opening of the homeless shelter and the unveiling of a statue of Captain Hammer. While Penny’s brief lines in “So They Say” focus on the shelter, Hammer sings about his newfound glory as a political crusader—singing “Thanks to me!” as Penny praises his help—and as Penny’s lover:

This is so nice
Just might sleep with the same girl twice
They say it’s better the second time
They say you get to do the weird stuff

While Penny has second thoughts about her relationship with Hammer:

There’s no happy ending
So they say
Should I stop pretending
Or is this a brand new day
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Dr. Horrible faces the reality of the consequences of his plan to kill him:

There’s no happy ending
So they say
Not for me anyway
Stop pretending
Take the chance to build a brand new day

Hammer’s narcissism comes to a head in his act-three solo, “Everyone’s a Hero.” The song sends up the notion of the hero in everyone, a common comic trope. Brown writes,

Superhero comics have always relied on the notion that a superman exists inside every man, and while the readers are well aware of this most fundamental convention, they are also aware that several new and incredibly popular comics are erasing the ordinary man underneath in favor of an even more excessively powerful and one-dimensional masculine ideal.17

Hammer sums up the concept that the hero in every man has become lessened, while the superheroes keep getting stronger, in the first chorus of his ballad:

Everyone’s a hero in their own way
Everyone’s got villains they must face
They’re not as cool as mine
But folks, you know it’s fine to know your place
Everyone’s a hero in their own way
In their own not-that-heroic way.

Hammer uses the ballad not only to establish his dominant heroic position, but also to reinforce his performance of masculinity. He sings, “So I thank my girlfriend, Penny / (yeah, we totally had sex)” in order to establish his heterosexual practices and activity; claims himself to be a lawful authority by designating himself “poverty’s new sheriff”; and brushes aside fears and concerns that would make him less of a man by singing, “A hero doesn’t care / If you’re a bunch of scary alcoholic bums.” At the end of his song, Hammer is frozen by Horrible’s freeze ray, accompanied by Horrible’s now-deep and practiced laugh. When the freeze ray’s effect wears
off and Hammer is reanimated, he pauses to finish the final cadence of his song—the ultimate act of hubris—before beginning to struggle with Horrible over the death ray, ostensibly to protect those in the room.

Horrible’s climactic song, “Slipping,” is the musical progeny of “Brand New Day.” Beginning with the same kind of *Sprechstimme* that opened “Brand New Day,” “Slipping” is Horrible’s invective against Hammer as well as the unthinking masses gathered to praise him as a hero: “Look at these people—amazing how sheep’l / Show up for the slaughter.” To the accompaniment of drums and heavy accents, Horrible continues: “Go ahead—run away / Say it was horrible,” projecting confidence and terrible anger. He is reconciled to the need for a deadly—and thus manly—show of force; although still protective and possessive of Penny, he hopes to shield her from his crime until he can show her the social change that comes out of it:

No sign of Penny—good.  
I would give anything not to have her see  
It’s gonna be bloody—head up Billy buddy  
There’s no time for mercy  
Here goes—no mercy . . .

Horrible’s performance in “Slipping” is forced by his jealousy of Hammer and Penny and by his desire to prove himself, both characteristics socially coded as acceptable as part of masculine behavior. His singing in “Slipping” goes uninfluenced by Penny’s moderating presence as it was in “My Eyes”; it remains martial in nature as Horrible parades through the homeless shelter with the death ray, firing it into the ceiling in a show of power. Although he pauses one last time before his final iteration of “no mercy,” he is prepared to follow through with his plan, even after the freeze ray fails and Hammer punches him to the floor.

The death ray, damaged in Horrible’s fall, explodes in Hammer’s hands, knocking Hammer across the room and throwing shrapnel, some of which hits Penny with fatal results. For Hammer, this is the first time he has felt pain, and his macho posturing comes undone as he screams, “I’m in pain! I think this is what pain feels like. Oh mama, someone maternal!” and bolts, crying, from the room. Penny dies in Horrible’s arms, telling him that “Captain Hammer will save us,” and Horrible’s origin story comes to an end.
When Hammer leaves the scene without thinking of Penny or anyone else, he fails what Richardson calls the superhero masculinity test:

While the superhero narrative tests the superhero’s masculinity—usually to the point of near destruction—his ordeals are not simply a trial so that he can win his princess. For example, the Superman films clearly posit Lois Lane as the object of desire, yet Superman’s battles are always for the greater good of mankind and not to win his princess. Superman offers an image of supreme masculine strength that is conflated with equally perfect goodness. Superman is self-sacrificing; he performs good deeds simply for the benefit of mankind and not for personal gain.

Indeed, Hammer is next seen on a therapist’s couch, shaking and cowering, while TV anchors lament his first-ever absence from his job as a superhero. Horrible, on the other hand, carries Penny’s body to the morgue gurney that bears her away, and while he is emotionally devastated, it is clear that his remorse will fuel his ambitions to follow through and create “social change / Anarchy—that I run.” His final song, “Everything You Ever,” focuses on what his achievement in evil has cost him personally. Recalling Horrible’s earlier anger, it draws on the repetitive piano figures from Horrible’s accompaniment in “My Eyes” in its first section, and then becomes the background for a party-mix style musical montage that also includes “Brand New Day” as Horrible makes his way through a victory celebration, changes into a new, red-and-black costume, and is admitted into a private room where the Evil League of Evil awaits him. During the bridge between these sections, Horrible is shown as a resigned but fully competent villain, emptying a bank with Moist. Both Hammer’s camp heroic masculinity and Horrible’s overemphasized feminine “weaknesses” have been destroyed. The mix itself aurally represents the newly (mostly) rejected “feminine” or compassionate and newly exaggerated masculine elements of Horrible’s post-Penny persona: “Everything You Ever” allows him to experience private grief, while an instrumental version of “Brand New Day” and the “Dr. Horrible Theme Music” herald his entry into the league and all that it stands for. In the last shot of act three, Horrible, dressed in Billy’s clothes, admits, unaccompanied, to his webcam that despite his ostensible victory and emergence as a deadly supervillain, he won’t feel “a thing.”
By casting the villain’s origin story, a classic element in comics, as a musical, the writers of both text and music of *Dr. Horrible* were able to subvert the expectations of viewers even a little familiar with the genre. *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog* plays heavily on feelings of nostalgia for the golden age of comics (1938–1956[^19]), in which “men were men” and heroes were always morally perfect: in Richardson’s words: “[Superman] protects the innocent simply because it is the right thing to do. He is the idealized hero.”[^20] Rugg notes that using nostalgia—even nostalgia for a fantasized present—is a powerful tool in drawing in audiences and creating compelling storytelling. “On the surface, musicals present a historically simplified America,” she writes. “However, history’s social and political complications seep through the cracks in those famous and oft-revived examples of the form, *Show Boat* (1927) and *Oklahoma!* (1943), and also in many more recent productions—*Kiss Me Kate*, *Chicago*, *The Music Man*, *Annie Get Your Gun*, *42nd Street*, *Seussical*, *The Full Monty*, and *Follies*. Throughout the twentieth century, two modes of nostalgia—cultural and personal—have been employed in the dramaturgy of musical theater.” By framing *Dr. Horrible* in the musical tradition of classic musical theater but also acknowledging its many more contemporary influences, such as *Rent* and the newly repopularized *Sweeney Todd*, *Dr. Horrible*’s writers create a safe space for the camp and ambiguities of gender upon which the work relies for characterization of its male leads.

The types of the songs themselves support this construction of *Dr. Horrible* as a play on gender roles both onstage and within the superhero comic genre. Stacy Wolf notes that in musicals of the 1940s and 1950s, “gender difference, then, signifies all difference, and heterosexual union, which culminates in the requisite romantic duet and then the choral finale, signifies the unification of the entire community.” *Dr. Horrible*, although using nostalgia to call up and parody these older styles of musicals, deliberately rejects this formula, as it does a happy, heteronormative ending. Penny and Horrible sing a duet, although not to each other. After their brief duet in act one, Penny and Hammer never sing to each other at the same time again, although Penny sings to Hammer. Finally, Hammer and Horrible never address each other in song, eliminating what Wolf delineates as the homosocial argument against any heterosexual pairings, citing “the better fit within their respective homosocial spheres, which are represented through singly
gendered chorus numbers, trios, and duets,” but also perhaps avoiding any potential for signifiers of homosocial accord to become or be read as those of homosexual desire.21 Both in situations when their masculinity is being performed successfully and those in which they are musically feminized by aspects external to their own implied desires, Horrible and Hammer sing alone. Wolf continues, writing that the conventional musical’s plot devices of pairing off heterosexual partners frequently fails: “In most integrated musicals, the second act consists primarily of reprises that wrap up the heterosexual narrative. This structure, as I have argued elsewhere, renders the musical’s heterosexual romance plot weak, frequently unconvincing, and utterly dependent on heteronormative cultural conventions and expectations for its believability (even in the not-so-believable world of musical theater).”22 In its design as an origin story as well as a send-up of traditional gender roles both in classic musicals and in the comic genres, Dr. Horrible rejects this narrative for the grittier, unhappy ending of many superhero origin comics, providing it with a stronger narrative than perhaps either genre could have done alone.23 By constructing a work that deconstructs expectations and role reversals in terms of superhero/villain sensibilities and masculinity, and the narratives of musical theater, Tancharoen and the three Whedon brothers successfully created a space in which camp can find common ground with pathos, leading to a complex and compelling origin story for Dr. Horrible.

Notes

5. All transcriptions of spoken dialogue are by the author.


13. All lyrics are quoted from “Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog (Soundtrack from the Motion Picture),” http://drhorrible.com/linernotes.html (accessed November 3, 2008).


20. Introduction, “Help is on the Way!”


23. Deaths in superhero comics include those of Elektra; pre-Crisis Supergirl; Spider-Man’s first major love interest, Gwen Stacy; Batman’s sidekick Robin; Captain America’s sidekick Bucky; and Barry Allen as the Flash. For more on the disproportionate deaths, depowerments, and destructions of female characters in the superhero genre, see Gail Simone, *Women in Refrigerators*, www.unheardtaunts.com/wir/index.html.

**Bibliography**


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