The musical is, by definition, a thoroughly interdisciplinary endeavor. The image of a composer isolated in his chilly room, trying to churn out inspired art, may sound like *Rent* but dates back to Beethoven—and it’s a romantic but false image in both cases. Art is created by its social context and, in turn, shapes it: Beethoven required performers, conductors, producers, and supporters to make music; Roger had to get out of the apartment and into the world before he was able to write a song. A musical needs a composer, lyricist, and bookwriter (these three jobs can be done by one, two, three, or more people), not to mention a director, producer, choreographer, designers, performers, musicians, and an audience in order to be fully formed. A musical, then, is a lived experience—not a script or a score.

Studying musicals thus requires at least some familiarity with multiple fields. A musicologist working on musical theater scholarship may need to learn some stuff about choreography along the way; a sociologist might need to dig a little into the history of lighting design. Every chapter in this book is, to varying degrees, an interdisciplinary study. Other sections have already gathered chapters that find musicologists using a gender lens, or theater historians using a race/ethnicity lens, or performance studies scholars using a philosophy lens, for example.

These chapters in particular, though, might be thought of as intentionally bringing together two or more fields—some of them unlikely or rare, others more traditional—as the fundamental approach. The scholars in this group model how to apply one discipline to another, or fuse the two, or allow the two to inform each other. Here, the musical meets the study of the sci-fi narrative, or historiography, or psychoanalysis, thereby giving us unusual and insightful perspectives.

Jake Johnson looks at the role of religion in musical theater, combining it with thoughts on “fake news” and other notions of what’s true in a “post-truth” world; he explores Bernstein’s *Mass* and *The Book of Mormon*, revealing a tension in reception history between secular and faith-based audiences. Sarah Taylor Ellis applies the notion of the time warp—borrowed from science fiction or fantasy stories—to the musical in order to explore how songs in musicals can bend, stop, speed up, or otherwise affect time in ways similar to those found in sci-fi. She links the notion of bent time to queer narrative strategies, opening up nonlinear and non-stable possibilities of storytelling. Aleksei Grinenko gives us an in-depth reading of *Next to Normal* via psychoanalysis, placing the show in the history of that field and demonstrating how the two disciplines—musical theater and psychoanalysis—inform each other in a musical that boldly avoids a tidy ending or a definitive “cure” to the main character’s mental illness.
Reading the Musical

Surveying the work of Stephen Schwartz, one of the most long-term successful composers of the last 40 years, Paul Laird invokes narrative analysis and traces the theme of parent/child relationships, revealing how the topic arises again and again in various guises in Schwartz’s work. Taking another composer who has been successful for decades, James Leve analyzes the recent work of John Kander, proposing a “late style” of music and subject matter that dwells on themes of personal reflection, and demonstrates impressively experimental musical and narrative style components.

Elissa Harbert takes history as her subject, running parallel with an exploration of the role of critics, to reveal that musicals about history are often reviewed with particular expectations—often harsh, judgmental ones at that. She asks how musicals about history are different from those with other narratives, and then demonstrates how critics approach such musicals with a preconceived set of criteria and expectations in mind. Thus, the lens of historiography gives us not only an understanding of these (supposedly, sort of) true musicals but also an understanding of critics’ self-defined roles as receivers of the works both as history and as entertainment.
On September 8, 1971, the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts opened in Washington, DC. That the slain president should be memorialized with a performing arts center was a tribute both to increased government support for the arts under his administration and to the musical-theatrical sensibility in which his political ideology would be framed after his death. Jacqueline Kennedy infamously orchestrated her late husband’s legacy by reference to the 1960 musical *Camelot*—which premiered on Broadway three years before Kennedy was shot and killed in Dallas, Texas—telling reporters that he frequently listened with fondness to the cast recording, reflecting especially on the show’s closing lyrics.1

It is fitting, then, that the opening of the Kennedy Center included the premiere of a musical-theatrical piece, *Mass*, composed by Leonard Bernstein with lyrics by Stephen Schwartz and Paul Simon, and commissioned by Jackie Kennedy herself. In stark contrast to the lithe tone and values of America’s *Camelot* past, however, Bernstein’s *Mass* captures the increasingly fractured, upside-down America ushered in by Kennedy’s death. This musical is a dark commentary on what Jimmy Carter would, later in the decade, call America’s “crisis of confidence”: a losing existential battle where America’s identity as benevolent savior, enforcer of good, global economic provider, and carrier of divine truth was increasingly held in suspicion by Americans themselves.2 Even Bernstein’s choice of genre—obviously modeled on the Roman Catholic Mass in a nod to Kennedy’s faith, and heavily inflected with numerous styles and idioms including popular music, opera, and American musical theater—relays the uneasy, shifting identity of Civil Rights-era America.

When the Celebrant comes forward in the opening number wearing plain clothes to tell those gathered that he will “sing the Lord a new song” that is “simple,” he alludes to the recognizable ninety-sixth psalm while also encapsulating the ideology of religious fundamentalism that was then encroaching upon American politics—largely one that continues to see the world’s problems as uncomplicated, and their solutions simple. Yet the Christ-like Celebrant’s hopeful message and unapologetic faith are also mired in symbols of what could be an acerbic counterculture when, in his first appearance, he is accompanied by guitar chords. In some productions, the Celebrant even carries a guitar with him while praising God, “the simplest of all,” with a new, uncomplicated message of renewal, optimism, and faith. A few years earlier, *Godspell* used popular idioms, as well as the guitar, to draw a somewhat haphazard connection between Jesus’ disciples and a tame version of the 1960s counterculture. But Bernstein’s Celebrant operates in a musical and cultural milieu that is much less optimistic and rosy, and that is thus perhaps a more apt representation of the gritty, aggressive corners of the 1960s counterculture movement. Inasmuch as the Celebrant’s
everyday, folksy character was visually and sonically at odds with Catholic conventions of priestly
conduct during the liturgy, his attempts to gain access to a simple God using a complex, heavily
ritualized religious service also did not resonate with the sentiments of the secular and often ag-
nostic principles of the counterculture he so obviously evoked. This was something new.

In this chapter, I make two interconnected observations. I first consider how musicals inhabit
and promote a "post-truth" worldview similar to those reflected in current populist resurgences
throughout the West. I argue that it is musical theater’s penchant for the unreal that in recent
decades has given it traction within both secular, liberalized communities and fundamentalist
religious ones. Further, as an important point of confluence between these groups, contemporary
musicals may help open a space for constructive dialogue among people with increasingly dispa-
rate worldviews. Second, I use two musicals—Leonard Bernstein’s Mass, described earlier, and the
2011 Broadway hit The Book of Mormon—to build a framework for understanding how contempo-
rary musicals hold in tension secular ideals and belief or faith, in a way that celebrates the current
post-secular desire to use religious optimism to mitigate secular pragmatism.

I will return to the Celebrant and the Mass later; for now, it will suffice for me to point out
that the wounded edges of American ideals triggered by Kennedy’s death and the subsequent
conspiratorial atmosphere that corrupted America’s faith in its government were sutured in part
by musical theater. On one side of the divide lies Camelot, Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe’s
continuation of the so-called Golden Age aesthetic of musical theater, penned at the dawn of a
new and optimistic decade; on the other side, Bernstein’s Mass, a bare-knuckled exploration of the
American faith crisis, whose appearance at the beginning of the 1970s emblematized the fractured
postmodern musical theater aesthetic, and offers a testament to the difference a decade can mean
in the identity of a nation. In both cases, musicals serve as handmaidens to very different realities.
Camelot was useful to Jackie Kennedy as a backward-looking reality, framing what was just briefly
a “shining moment” of American prosperity and civility. Mass looks forward, using the same mu-
sical conventions as Camelot, to illustrate America’s turmoil and question once-sacred political and
religious institutions that were increasingly understood as causes of and not solutions for America’s
post-Kennedy hardships.

Given the current political climate around the world, it is not difficult to feel pangs of famil-
liarity with this scenario. Populist movements in America and Europe have signaled a renewed
interest in the backward-looking reality represented by Kennedy’s Camelot. One of the world’s
more distressing neologisms, “post-truth,” appears to have held liberal elites and progressives
tongue-tied and aghast as once-trusted platforms of liberal ideals—journalism and higher edu-
cation chief among them—seem neutered in a seismic shift of public opinion away from objec-
tivity and toward emotional and personal belief as the most influential tenets shaping our reality.
Musicals, too, have become a promulgator of progressive ideals, if inconsistently so: in the years
since Camelot, they are often viewed as left-leaning, and the people who make and consume them
as diverse and enormously accepting. This is the case despite the fact that in many respects, the
liberal qualities of musical theater are a thin veneer covering a genre that remains very stubbornly
tethered to tradition, and an audience that remains stubbornly homogenous. There have been
strong examples of progressivism on the Broadway stage, but for the most part it takes a degree of
reality-suspension beyond that required even for musical theater to imagine the musical stage as a
bastion of progressive ideals and values.

Even the most politically ambitious and liberally motivated musical of recent memory,
Lin-Manuel Miranda’s 2015 monster hit Hamilton, is dependent upon a liberal spinning of the life
of the real Alexander Hamilton. Hamilton projects liberal ideals onto the past by cherry-picking
aspects of Hamilton’s life (particularly the musical’s construction of him as benevolent immigrant)
that are seemingly in line with current liberalized ideologies, yet out of line with historical fact.
Crucially, the musical plays up the importance of America’s societal underbelly in shaping the
early nation, even though the financial system the real Hamilton constructed arguably has led to the disparities of wealth in America that create that social underclass in the first place. Conservatism and neoliberal ideologies therefore are baked into Hamilton, and it is entirely possible that the populist right will recognize Hamilton as their own story and wrench it out of liberal hands for their own purposes.

This points to an uncomfortable admission: musical theater has long been a source and promoter of what might be called a post-truth reality. You don’t have to look very far to find examples of unreality in musicals; the very act of people bursting into song and dance defies realness in most senses of the term. The reconciliatory fantasy where all loose ends tie up, the hero gets the girl, and the villains get their comeuppance is categorically American and unabashedly escapist—and a more mundane but equally pernicious flavor of the desperate escapism heard within recent mantras like “Make America Great Again.” The protagonists in musicals are rarely complicated and their songs reflect basic, straightforward desires (the ever-present “I am” and “I want” song types, such as “I’m Alive” from Next to Normal and “Somewhere That’s Green” from Little Shop of Horrors, for example), while antagonists struggle with and sing about complex feelings and behaviors. Audiences watching Oklahoma!, for example, are perhaps better primed to understand protagonist Curley’s simple, if not arrogant, desire to court Laurey than to sympathize with his nemesis Jud’s brooding revenge plot in his number “Lonely Room.”

As a result, a mild anti-intellectualism pervades musical theater, which perhaps inadvertently undermines liberal values of critical thinking and reason in order to make for good drama. So while musicals have enjoyed a reputation as a somewhat-liberalized platform for political ideals not yet in place, they likewise dally in a post-truth sensibility that places liberal communities in much closer proximity to the current populist uprising than many would care to admit. Musical theater’s reach into the far corners of America’s social fabric impels us to consider how contemporary musicals matter to increasingly entrenched ideological communities, which perhaps will lead to a cautious optimism that even this single point of confluence is enough to begin a dialogue between them.

One way to begin understanding how musicals help construct a post-secular worldview is to consider the genre’s religious roots. Alexander Saxton points out that blackface minstrelsy, an early predecessor to musical comedy, emerged in upstate New York as a form of national entertainment in the mid-nineteenth century that reflected Jacksonian principles of self-fashioning and white supremacy.3 Mormonism, Adventism, and other restorative faiths emerge from this same time, place, and ideological current, carrying forward the performative and theatrical inclinations of fundamentalist religion such as tongue-speaking and speaking on behalf of God. Early American fundamentalism and early American musical theater are cut from the same ideological cloth—one that often drapes outside the realm of veracity. They both are concerned with worlds yet unseen or unattainable, and both put a lot of weight on the necessities of vocal theatricality in order to access those worlds.

The result is that the musical has retained a pious identity, never quite shaken from its ideological tethering to the religious impulses used to justify nineteenth-century white supremacy despite its often wanton and lewd subject matter. By the early twentieth century, musicals were considered a wholesome, white, middle-class genre replete with religious values inscribed within reconciliatory, redemptive stories, where right and wrong were clearly demarcated and good always triumphed over evil.4 This Protestant religiosity pervades musicals overtly in times past: Cole Porter famously referred to Richard Rodgers’s tunes as having a certain “holiness” about them, and Oscar Hammerstein II’s liberal Jewish and Protestant upbringing clearly impelled him to imbue his stories with strong moral resonances.5

Musicals now operate more covertly, with gospel-inflected eleventh-hour numbers like “I Know Where I’ve Been” from Hairspray (2002) representing so common a trope in contemporary
musicals that many shows barely evade becoming staged sermons. Perhaps it is for these reasons that Mormons, evangelical Christians, Jews, Scientologists, and other religious communities who otherwise have little in common embrace the musical stage as a convenient space to explore and express spiritual values. It's not difficult to see how musicals as a genre are beholden to tradition, a rare expression of popular culture that remains steadfastly committed to spreading good news and modeling a hope in reconciliation without feeling preachy or overbearing. Musicals both implicitly and explicitly project religious values, and it's no small wonder that religious fundamentalists from Branson, Missouri to Colorado City, Utah have used musicals as vehicles to evangelize among others and comfort their own.7

If musicals are framed by religion in various ways, that framework can sometimes appear disjointed when the subject of the musical appears to be at odds with purported religious values. When musicals turned to more overtly religious topics in the 1970s, as with Jesus Christ Superstar and Godspell, they usually did so with the secular intention of humanizing divine figures. The rise of the concept musical during this time, most notably in musicals by Stephen Sondheim, gave audiences fractured plots and uneasy resolutions rather than the more preachy morality of musicals from previous generations. As John Bush Jones has argued, the fragmented plots of concept musicals “mirrored the fragmented American society of the 1970s and the anxieties of inward-turning individuals.”8 Still, even the most stridently critical and irreverent musicals of all eras maintain at heart an idealism, in which powerful emotions like hope and love generate their own logic. Even the Jacksonian ideology of white supremacy rested on a nationalist fervor and excited optimism for an expanding frontier, while also sentimentalizing through minstrelsy the mythic journey of the slave who desperately clung to what was being left behind. It is on the axis of empathy, then, that musicals pivot from one topic to another, never fully escaping the religious and political idealism from which the genre was born.

The Book of Mormon

The musical The Book of Mormon makes for a compelling case study of this phenomenon, not least because of the great theological prominence actual Mormons afford to American musical theater. Mormonism was born in upstate New York, alongside blackface minstrelsy. As Mormons slowly developed from a fringe polygamist sect to an iconic American religion (what Harold Bloom called “the American religion”), they attached themselves to a musical theater aesthetic to help garner white, middle-class respectability. Even more, because of the ideological roots Mormonism and musical theater share, musicals have served both a pragmatic and theological need for Mormons, even today. Mormons in the twentieth century used musicals to change their popular image from un-American and racially suspect to ideal Americans: solid representatives of white, middle-class sensibilities. That remarkable transformation was all the more remarkable since it was musical theater that became a primary conduit for Mormons to change the tune, so to speak.9

Mormons eventually paid a price for their close association with musical theater. The Book of Mormon creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone grew up around Mormons and noted that Mormons seem so musical theater-like that the two iconic American institutions actually have a lot in common. In their minds, Mormons, Rodgers and Hammerstein, and Disney were different words for the same idea.10 Lampooning Mormons on stage may have been convenient for those reasons, but Mormonism is such an emblem of homegrown Americana that it also becomes in the show a synecdoche for religious Americans more broadly. While The Book of Mormon is satirical and gets laughs at the expense of real Mormons and some of the beliefs they hold sacred, it is easy to read the musical as not defaming the religious but celebrating them. In fact, the musical—a self-described “atheist love letter to religion”—concludes by suggesting that religious beliefs are a good thing, no matter how ridiculous they may be, if they help people deal with the complexities of
Distinguishing fact from fiction isn’t always a useful task, the musical insists; as John Updike writes, “The crucial question isn’t Can you prove it? but Does it give us a handle on the reality that otherwise would overwhelm us?”

To be sure, The Book of Mormon mercilessly critiques the dogmatic principles young Mormon missionaries naively extend to people and places they cannot fully understand, but it also tacitly admits that the problems facing the Ugandans—abusive warlords, impoverishment, an unchecked AIDS epidemic—represent some of the many failures of secular, neoliberal policies. Scholars refer to such admissions of the secular worldview’s limitations as post-secularism. In his seminal book Partial Faiths, John McClure analyzes post-secular novels and observes that one constant feature is that characters are not rescued from the secular world and brought to safety on the other side of a religious conversion. Rather, these characters often become stranded in “the ideologically mixed and confusing middle zones of the conventional conversion narrative.” McClure notes that this liminal space does not discomfit the characters, who are content to remain outside of a “fully elaborated form of belief and practice.” For McClure, as well as thinkers as diverse as Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, and Richard Rorty, our post-secular fictions (which undoubtedly include musicals) capture a liminality in contemporary life, where people are caught somewhere between faith and reason, yet remain satisfied in their in-between-ness because the limitations of both secular and religious ideals are now so apparent. Scholars, artists, and writers seem to suggest, then, that the critical combination of the two is what offers a more promising and happy future.

This post-secular aesthetic is evident in The Book of Mormon. Elder Price sings the anthem “I Believe” in a retrenchment move to hold onto his faith, keeping doubt at bay by repressing feelings of insecurity and shaken confidence in his and God’s power. The song is comical because of how sincerely the missionary believes what sounds like ridiculous dogma. In fact, all the things Elder Price mentions as being important tenets of his faith—things like the Garden of Eden being in Jackson County, Missouri or ancient Jews sailing to America—are empirically false by secular standards; science has disproven most of Elder Price’s beliefs, and the rest quickly crumble under the scrutiny of reason. Nonetheless, the audience is easily charmed by how these goofy admissions so easily roll off Elder Price’s tongue. We want Elder Price to succeed—he is our hero, after all—even though we find it hard to take his beliefs seriously. In this song, perhaps more than others in the musical, the post-secular balance of faith and reason is put on display. Importantly, the audience maintains part of that balance: we hold Elder Price accountable for his naiveté, something of which he is completely unaware. As a community of theatrical participants, then, both Elder Price and the audience create a reality where faith’s idealism and secular pragmatism coexist productively.

Ironically for Mormons, this faith-affirming message is at odds with Mormonism’s mid-twentieth-century turn away from statements like “I believe” and toward the more empirical “I know”—slight changes with significant repercussions. As the Mormon Church attempted to distance itself from its sometimes unsavory and un-American past (e.g. polygamy and proto-socialist communities), Church leaders began pruning back some of the more unruly aspects of the faith to make it more manageable, easier to standardize, and therefore more readily transplanted to other parts of the world. One result of intense standardization, however, is an overemphasis on obedience to rules and standards, rather than more fluid principles of individual faith experiences. Knowledge of Mormon values and principles, then, was placed at a premium. Today, Mormons rarely speak of “believing” one thing or another, preferring instead to state objectively that, through the confirmation of the Holy Spirit, they “know” various Mormon truth claims are true.

The nature of knowledge is that it is the antithesis of faith—Paul admits as much when he writes that “faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). That said, Mormons today bandy about a surety of their convictions that actually dispels faith in favor of reason. The implication of using “I know” to articulate what is typically phrased by the religious as “I believe” is that objective reality exists alongside a faith-based one of “things not seen.” Mormons
therefore exemplify a post-secular worldview in that they find the tension between facts and belief to be productive, and the differences between the two to be fluid. This helps explain why Elder Price’s push against encroaching doubt in “I Believe” ultimately fails him. By singing that “a Mormon just believes,” he is getting his theology wrong; it is he in this instance, not the bumbling Elder Cunningham, who is getting caught “making things up.”14 A modern Mormon missionary may “believe” all the things Elder Price mentions about Jews sailing to America or the concept of eternal progression on distant planets, but he would articulate them in objective, rather than subjective, terms.

The moral of The Book of Mormon is that beliefs are powerful precisely because they aren’t rigidly true; they can be molded to fit different needs at different times for different people. When Elder Price sees the fruits of Elder Cunningham’s labor—that the Ugandan villagers have been converted to a bastardized Mormonism, as demonstrated in their pageant “Joseph Smith American Moses”—he finally gets it. “That play was the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,” he tells Elder Cunningham. “Scripture isn’t that important. I was losing my faith and you went out and did something incredible...for a people who had nowhere else to go. I thought they were unreachable, but then they were happy, and hopeful, and wearing costumes.” We might distill Elder Price’s revelation as learning that the ends justify the means. Giving people hope and a sense of purpose is important, even vital, even if the stories they teach aren’t true in a factual sense. Truth, the missionaries learn, is not a quality of the doctrine but a measure of how effectively their stories help people lead better lives. To put it another, more slanted way, there are times when what is objectively true may be less important than what feels right.

A Simple Song

So, what of the Celebrant in Bernstein’s Mass, singing the opening number “Simple Song”? “Make it up as you go along” and “sing like you like to sing,” he proclaims, adding “God loves all simple things / For God is the simplest of all.” He goes on to sing what becomes a trope throughout the song and even a musical moral of the entire story: lauda, laude. Lauda refers to a sacred vernacular song style popular in Italy in the late medieval period that was especially associated with mendicant, or traveling, preachers. Laude is Latin for “with highest honor.” We know from his text, then, that the Celebrant is itinerant, entering our musical world as a stranger in a strange land, and that his theology is centered around song—an auspicious beginning for a musical, so it seems.

The Celebrant preaches one thing, but the music says something else. As composer Daron Hagen has observed, the open G and D guitar chords at the song’s start sound about as simple as can be—and cleverly refer to God, “G-D,” without the middle note of the chord. Yet the Celebrant’s slowly descending melodic line (“Sing God a simple song”) pauses momentarily at the C-sharp on the word “God,” creating over the G major bass a piercing tritone, a sonic signifier long associated with the devil.15 The precarious nature of having faith in a secular age is captured in that single moment of clashing harmonies—a sonic corollary to Anne Sexton’s poetic line, “My faith / is a great weight / hung on a small wire.”16 Indeed, the Celebrant seems haunted by both good and evil spirits during the Mass as he slowly gets crushed beneath taunting and humiliating jests from the 16 “street singers” who, like him, never leave the stage. In fact, the Celebrant seems more in keeping with the unstable preachers of Flannery O’Connor’s imagination than with the strong, confident protagonist we expect in musical theater.

The Celebrant attempts to administer the sacraments throughout the service, but is regularly interrupted by his stage companions, who hurl pithy asides like “I believe in God, but does God believe in me?” and offer tender reflections on their own loss of faith. They are keen critics of contemporary life, singing at one point—presciently, from today’s perspective—that “half of the people are stoned and the other half are waiting for the next election. Half the people are drowned and the other half are swimming in the wrong direction.”17
By the end of Mass, the Celebrant, like Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, carries the scorn and mockery of the crowd until he can no longer bear it. He has a breakdown, reflecting upon the retreat of religious principles from public life, “how easily things get broken.” The crowd watches in silence, unable to look away from a man in the midst of what is obviously a psychological crisis. Finally, a young boy soprano enters; his character is named simply “Young Celebrant,” and he picks up the strains of the Celebrant’s opening number. The rest of the ensemble slowly joins in, but they don’t sing in unison. Rather, the Celebrant’s simple song is turned into a canon, with voices entering and exiting the texture with increasing rapture. The most prominent words in the text are lauda laude. Amid these cacophonous voices, the lauda seems both stylistically and dramatically appropriate. The simple monophonic song style that began in the medieval era gradually evolved into a more complex polyphonic texture in the centuries that followed. Similarly, the simple song that begins this ancient service transforms by the end of the musical. The street singers acknowledge in the end the usefulness, even the necessity, of the Celebrant’s faith by placing his simple message within the intellectual complexity of a canon—his simple song growing from an invitation to join to a statement on belonging.

This scene evocatively unites the religious message overtly laid out in the opening bars of Mass with a secular pressure to rationalize and categorize faith out of public discourse. As a statement on the post-secular, it shows the fatal flaws of both secular and religious worldviews and delights in imagining the effects of their union, if only musically. In its context as a memorial to John F. Kennedy, Mass creates a very different sense of idealism and sentiment than what Jackie Kennedy intended in associating her husband with Camelot. But Mass doesn’t seem to have been written for the slain president. Instead, it seems aimed at those left in the wake of his death: “Let the dead bury the dead,” Jesus said, “but go thou and preach the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:60). Like The Book of Mormon, Mass is at times irreverent and cacophonous, and can thus be difficult to sit through. Both musicals deal overtly with religion, and in important ways both shows problematize religion in America. They are worlds apart in style, in smarts, in time, and in substance, but they both get at the heart of post-secular ideals. In the vein of musicals before them, they defy truth and relish obscuring it.

While I type these sentences, our political world reels from uncertainty, and flinches already from the pain that surely will afflict many people. Most uncertainty lies in the gulf that seems to divide those who see truth as substance and those who see it as emotion. As Sarah Ahmed has argued, emotions don’t inhabit us so much as they are performed behaviors, prone to easily “slide” from one form and one person to another and another. The same may be true for truth. If “post-truth” seems an impossible obstacle to overcome, a stubborn and persistent ghost haunting our heated conversations and failed dialogues, then perhaps some solace can be found in its tenuousness, its shape-shifting nature that slides from one form to another. Many musicals imply that it is possible for a world where truths and facts don’t always count to also be a world where an invitation to sing is met with a chorus of belonging. If nothing else, the characters in Bernstein’s Mass and in Parker and Stone’s The Book of Mormon exemplify how to wed belief and knowledge for positive results. The ends justify the means these musicals seem to echo. We can show you how to get to the other side for just a song and a dance.

Notes


2 Carter delivered this as part of a televised address on July 15, 1979. Carter, a long-time Sunday school teacher, framed his plea in familiar Christian rhetoric, where showing faith is a sign of strength: “We
simply must have faith in each other, faith in our ability to govern ourselves, and faith in the future of this nation. Restoring that faith and that confidence to America is now the most important task we face. It is a true challenge of this generation of Americans."


5 Quoted in Bradley, 72.


7 Consider, for example, popular productions by Sight & Sound Theaters in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and Branson, Missouri, including Moses, Jesus, and Jonah, and the FLDS polygamous community in Utah who re-wrote The Sound of Music to be a polygamist propaganda piece. It is undoubtedly the fluidity of musicals to mean what we need or want them to mean that allows them such variability among disparate religious groups.


9 Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Mormons were depicted in operetta and musical theater as ethnic minorities, largely because the practice of polygamy placed them in close proximity to “problematic” groups like Islam. When the Mormon Church suspended polygamy officially in the late nineteenth century, they used musicals to change the narrative and garner broader acceptance by white Americans. Consider, for example, the 1944 Mormon musical Promised Valley, modeled after Oklahoma!, in which Mormon values of hard work, religious vision, and commitment to normative family values are used to demonstrate their story as quintessentially American. Anti-Mormon sentiment begins to wane by 1950, after which Mormons enjoy several decades of acceptance not only as part of the white American community, but exemplars of it.


