Abstract

During the summer of 1912, a self-deluded salesman has to face the truth about his biggest “pipe dream.” This realization leads to the arms of the town librarian and earns him respectability as the leader of the boys’ band. The time frame, the job of salesman, and the attitude toward women are just three elements that Professor Harold Hill and Theodore Hickman share. Screenwriter Jessica Westfeldt astutely comments that The Iceman Cometh and The Music Man tell essentially the same story, but Harold Hill’s fate is arguably more disturbing than that of Hickey. O’Neill’s salesman will attain peace through death, but Hill has to live up to the most unlikely of miracles—his pipe dream of being a real conductor comes true. This “dark” element of The Music Man at least partially accounts for its success, and is also important in understanding the failure of the highly anticipated Disney TV production in 2003.

Seventy-six trombones, trouble in River City, barbershop quartets and Wells Fargo wagons—these are images and phrases familiar to those with even a casual knowledge of Meredith Willson’s The Music Man. The show’s hero, Professor Harold Hill (this trip—he’s known to at least one old friend as “Gregory”), convinces the town of River City, Iowa that “there’s terrible trouble”—not only because of a new pool table, but because the kids have started to read Cap’n Billy’s Whiz Bang and introduce scandalous slang such as “swell” and “so’s your old man” into their vocabulary (Willson 1958:37). Hill and his world would appear to be at a great remove from the world of one of Eugene O’Neill’s most dark and disturbing tragedies, The Iceman Cometh. Nevertheless, the kinship between Hill and O’Neill’s salesman of death Hickey reveals the interesting dark territory of Music Man that is largely responsible for its long-term appeal—or at least, responsible for the strange and subversive way that it works as entertainment. Furthermore, it is a lack of understanding of this dark side that spelled ruin for the much-publicized (and perhaps, quickly forgotten) 2003 Disney televised remake.
The daily New York critics on December 20, 1957 spoke almost unanimously in heralding Harold Hill as a success. As Hill himself might have put it, certain words crept into the dailies’ vocabulary—words like “corn,” “wholesome,” “innocent,” and “warm-hearted”—all elements, as the Sun’s Frank Aston poetically commented, of “a strength drawn from the fertile breast of this continent’s Middle West” (Aston “Tune Show”). Two critics, Richard Watts from the Post and Walter Kerr of the Herald Tribune, recognized, if only in passing reference, something perhaps less innocent and wholesome in Hill’s character—they both used the term “racy” (Watts “Charm,” and Kerr “Music Man”). To understand just how racy, it could be useful to make some direct comparisons between the salesmen Hill and Hickey.

Hickey, in his climactic “aria,” describes in detail his longtime friendships and dalliances with prostitutes—ranging from the madam who “staked” him to his first job, to the “tart in Altoona” from whom Hickey “pick[s] up a nail”—a venereal disease he in turn passes on to his simultaneously beloved and despised wife Evelyn, whom we learn Hickey has killed (O’Neill 1967:236). While Hill has apparently dodged the clap at least as adroitly as he has the law, he shares with Hickey an appreciation of women of easy virtue, as he recounts in song in “The Sadder-But-Wiser Girl.” Not only does Hill “spark” and “grin/ when the gal with the touch of sin walks in,” but, to put the issue of carnal knowledge more explicitly, he claims toward the end of the number, “I hope and I pray/ for Hester to win just one more ‘A’” (Willson 1958:71).

Willson’s musical was a triumph of nostalgia to begin with—1950s big city audiences savoring an idealized small-town 1912. Nostalgia further fuels the vision of The Music Man as a “family” show, which is supported by the practical fact of the chorus requiring a fairly large number of kids. What high school drama instructors and community theatre directors (along with the parents) might have overlooked are the less-than-wholesome plans of Professor Hill. What young aspiring actors encountering Hill for the first time might well miss is the fact that for Hill, right until the stylized “Till There Was You/76 Trombones” duet, the heroine Marian the Librarian is nothing more nor less than a potent potentially memorable one-night stand. As Hill assures Marcellus, who protests that one’s making-out opportunities are limited at the notorious footbridge, “There’s a place over’t Madison Park near the sociable makes this footbridge look like the old ladies home” (Willson 1958:141). Nostalgia for the musical (and, in many cases, the 1962 film version) combines with the nostalgia within the play itself to encourage audiences to reinvent an often “racy” tale as a “wholesome” musical for the whole family. As Fredric Jameson points out, audiences effect a similar reinvention “about the past and about specific generational moments of that past” when watching “nostalgia films” such as Star Wars (1998: 7-8).
Perhaps even more sordidly, Hill enjoys the reputation of a mass ravager of spinster music teachers. As disgruntled anvil salesman Charlie Cowell reports to Marian, “he’s got a girl in every county in Illinois, and he’s taken it away from every one of ‘em! And that’s 102 counties!” (Willson 1958: 127). It is a number impressive enough to give Marian pause, even as she’s falling for the professor—she nearly asks him point blank to verify the figure a little later. One would imagine Hickey would be impressed as well. From the standpoint of genre, the differences between *The Music Man* and *The Iceman Cometh* might not be so clear cut as (musical) comedy vs. tragedy. O’Neill himself found a great deal of humor in his play, as he commented in an interview shortly before *Iceman*’s Broadway opening: “I think I’m aware of comedy more than I ever was before; a big kind of comedy that doesn’t stay funny very long” (Gelb 1973:871). O’Neill further employs a considerable amount of songs and music throughout the course of the play—the sodden law student Willie Oban sings a lewd song about a sailor and a girl; the broken anarchist Hugo consistently breaks into his French revolutionary song “La Carmagnole;” the play ends with a cacophony of different and competing songs of the period and the generation earlier, and perhaps most significantly, Hickey himself “puts on an entrance act” (O’Neill 1967:76) complete with boisterous singing.

The viewer and reader can discern further similarities in the physical, costumed aspects of Hickey and Hill. O’Neill’s typically detailed description of Hickey could conceivably serve as a description of Hill as well:

> You get the impression . . . that he must have real ability in his line. There is an efficient, business-like approach in his manner, and his eyes can take you in shrewdly at a glance. He has the salesman’s mannerisms of speech, an easy flow of glib, persuasive convincingness. His clothes are those of a successful drummer whose territory consists of minor cities and small towns—not flashy but conspicuously spic and span [1967:76].

Both Hill and Hickey, in their stage, TV, and film incarnations, conspicuously share a similar wardrobe—most notably, the boater hat. A gentleman’s warm-weather and boating hat, it serves as a key signifier of barber-shop quartets and snake-oil salesmen—thanks, to a large degree, to *The Music Man*’s enduring popularity.

There is also an “acting” similarity between Hickey and Hill, particularly when the researcher examines some of the notable actors who have essayed the role of Hickey. James Barton, the first Hickey, was a song-and-dance veteran of vaudeville and musical revues. Jason Robards, who gained stardom in the legendary 1956 revival of *Iceman*, was, not necessarily coincidentally, considered for the role of Hill. Kevin Spacey’s Hickey, in the 1999 Broadway revival, earned great acclaim, with an interesting, and pertinent, exception. *Village Voice* critic Michael Feingold, in his negative review that evokes Arthur
Miller’s great contribution to the history of the American stage salesman, found fault with Spacey’s interpretation: “Salesmen ride on Arthur Miller’s ‘smile and a shoeshine’; Spacey omits the first item, suggesting, instead of the deceitful glad-hander Hickey, an irate Harold Hill in some dark rethinking of The Music Man” (Feingold “Death of a Salesman” 1999:2). While Feingold saw a “dark rethinking of The Music Man” as cripplingly inappropriate, the idea might not be as far-fetched as it sounds.

Hickey and Hill share a profession, of course, as well as spatial and temporal territory—that is, both are successful salesmen hitting smallish towns in the summer of 1912. While Hill is more the out-and-out swindler—Hickey has not needed to change his name, and he holds a legitimate position, despite his devastating “periodicals”—Hickey freely admits that his general pitch consists of little more than kidding people. It is here, perhaps, that the kinship and twinship of Hickey and Hill are most prominent—with the issue of selling hope and lies, not only to unsuspecting rubes and suckers, but to themselves as well. For both Iceman and Music Man are grounded in what Raymond Williams referred to as “private tragedy,” or the “tragedy of the isolated being” (Williams 1969:116). As Williams explains, “The isolated persons clash and destroy each other, not simply because their particular relationships are wrong, but because life as such is inevitably against them” (116). Thus in Iceman, Larry, “the old wise guy” who becomes Hickey’s “only real convert to death,” cries in ultimate surrender, “Life is too much for me” (O’Neill 1967: 256). Life indeed is “too much” for all the characters of Iceman, including and especially Hickey, whose pipe dream serves as the equivalent of Ibsen’s “life-lie,” the fantasy humanity requires to make life bearable. And, even when taking into account all the colors and trappings of American musical comedy at its most sprightly, the “pipe dream” or “life-lie” is just as vital to Professor Hill—life is “too much” for him, so he invents, improvises, and cajoles others into sharing his vision. Hill’s mistake, as is Hickey’s, is that he believes he is in control of the pipe dream at all times.

Hickey’s success, as he reports and reveals, lies in his ability to size up the pipe dreams of others: “It was like a game, sizing people up quick, spotting what their pet pipe dreams were, and then kidding ‘em along that line, pretending you believed what they wanted to believe about themselves” (O’Neill 1967: 235). Hill, for his part, understands that people’s love of music often coincides with the belief that their children possess great musical talent—inhaerited from the untapped talents of the parents. Both salesmen, however, nurse pipe dreams of their own. Hickey is certain that his murder of his wife was a mercy killing—he was putting Evelyn out of her misery, as he repeats numerous times, “for the peace of all concerned.” Hill’s pipe dream is considerably less violent, but perhaps no less powerful—he dreams of really being a music man, and leading a real band.
This belief brings an evangelical fervor to the speech patterns of both Hickey and Hill. Just as Hickey invokes the “brothers and sisters” rhetoric of his minister father in eulogizing the regulars at Harry Hope’s saloon to give up their pipe dreams, Hill’s signature song, “Trouble,” sweeps up the staid “River Cityzians” in revival meeting fury, complete with references to the devil (“friends, the idle brain is the devil’s playground”) and gesticulations toward Heaven (Willson 1958:36). A comparison of dialogue and lyrics sheds greater light on the similarity of performance between the two salesmen. In Hill’s show-stopping number, he warns the River City citizenry: “We've surely got trouble! Right here in River City/ Right here!” (38) Hickey reaches a fiery peak at the end of the second act: “I wouldn’t say this unless I knew, Brothers and Sisters. This peace is real! It’s a fact! I know! Because I’ve got it! Here! Now! Right in front of you! You see the difference in me! . . . And I promise you, by the time this day is over, I’ll have every one of you feeling the same way!” (O’Neill 1967: 148). One could almost imagine the denizens of Harry Hope’s saloon chanting “Trouble, trouble, trouble” in support of Hickey’s slightly different kind of show-stopper—Hickey pledges to rid Harry Hope’s saloon of pipe dreams; Hill pledges to rid River City of its terrible trouble and to “figger out a/ Way t’keep the young ones/ Moral after school” (Willson 1958:37).

The Music Man’s original, and perhaps definitive, Harold Hill, actor Robert Preston (whose first musical role this was), succeeded in embodying a musical snake-oil salesman. (The image of snake-oil salesman is also evoked in Iceman, in circus con man Ed Mosher’s long and joking description of a shifty “physician” friend of his. ) Of the daily critics, Kerr best articulated the fervor Preston brought to Hill onstage (happily captured for future audiences in the 1962 film): “Mr. Preston is impatient with dialogue. Let a couple of people talk, and he fidgets. Let a split-second gap in chatter turn up, and his feet starts [sic] working. A fairly fierce light turns up in his eyes, an urgent whisper begins to conspire with the underscoring . . .” (Kerr “Music Man” 1958:149). This fierce light and urgency renders both Hill and Hickey vulnerable to their ultimate and respective downfalls—both caused by selfless and loving gestures by women.

Hickey is emotionally destroyed by wife Evelyn’s constant love and forgiveness: “There’s a limit to the guilt you can feel and the forgiveness and the pity you can take!” he cries (O’Neill 1967: 239). In turn, Miss Marian, for all her love (and because of it), overthrows Hill in a similar fashion. She knows he is a fraud, she accepts that “there have been many ports of call”—a polite reference to that deflowering of 102 music teachers—and she is more than willing to have Hill take it away from her, too (Willson 1958:139). Hill’s response is similar to Hickey’s—what else can he do but fall in love and tarry long enough to get captured by a mob preparing tar and feather?

Both salesmen must face their pipe dreams—Hickey retreats into madness after recreating the moment of shooting his wife, laughing wildly and calling
Evelyn a “damned bitch.” O’Neill vividly describes his terrible self-realization: “He stops with a horrified start, as if shocked out of a nightmare, as if he could not believe he heard what he has just said” (O’Neill 1967: 241-242). Hill, in turn, much like the denizens of Hope’s saloon, is pushed into making his dream a living reality. Significantly, it is the only moment of the show where Hill can find neither appropriate word nor action. Part of the appeal of Preston’s performance is not only the fervent belief in what he is selling, but also the sheer improvisational joy he brings to any potential trap—the more he is caught dead to rights, the more he responds to the challenge of bare-facing his way out of it (convincing the mayor his non-existent son was born to play the flugelhorn, for example). When, however, Marian breaks the classroom pointer in two and hands half of it to Hill as a baton to lead the band (a perhaps disconcertingly Freudian gesture), Hill can only say, “No, I couldn’t.” The one thing Hill cannot do is live his pipe dream. As he admits earlier to Marian’s younger brother Winthrop, he has his foot caught in the door—the same door, it could be said, that in Iceman leads out of the safety of Hope’s saloon and into the real world where pipe dreams must be acted upon, or killed altogether.

Appropriately for a musical comedy, Hill succeeds—the Minuet in G is butchered, but recognizable. The townspeople are proud (“That’s my Barney!” [157]), and the way is clear for Hill to assume his new roles: River City boys’ band director, Marian’s husband, and young, lisping Winthrop’s father figure. Indeed, his new role includes the “realization” of Hill’s two most fundamental lies—he not only becomes a real bandleader, but he becomes Professor Harold Hill—the name and the identity of “Gregory” is discarded along with the necessity to take the money and run. It is as if, for example, Willie Oban in Iceman returned to Harry Hope’s with a job at the D.A.’s office, or if Lieutenant McGloon did indeed get reinstated on the police force. Just as O’Neill forces the issue of whether or not the residents of Harry Hope’s place would be happy if their pipe dreams came true, a similar question arises in the case of the Professor—how happy is this happy ending?

The tuneful final curtain of Music Man comes at a sacrifice—not only of laughter, for the happy ending of a comedy typically signals the end of laughter—but also a sacrifice of Hill’s vitality, his life force. As Ethan Mordden explains, Hill’s combination of “improvisation, wit, [and] fearlessness” was rather unique in Broadway musical history: “the American musical seldom confronted that kind of man except in operetta, where he was usually played by baritones with the swank of a curate and the nerve of Cracker Jack. The musical really prefers boyfriends, kiddos, or unreformable hustlers; the prospect of a solid man throws it off its foundation” (Mordden 1983:157). The (inevitably) successful culmination of the love story brings an end to Hill’s show-driving hustle—and, not incidentally, an end to the most entertaining element of the show. Hill’s fatal flaw, in other words, is that he is a reformable hustler. It was
this quality of “reformability” that Disney seized upon when producing a TV version of The Music Man for the 21st century.

The Disney Company, in their quest to remake The Music Man, clearly understood that the love story element represented something of a letdown. In interviews shortly before the show’s February 2003 premiere, director Jeff Bleckner insisted that the love story between Hill and Marian would take center stage—a relationship often eclipsed in previous productions by [Hill’s] shenanigans,” as the New York Times article pointed out (Pogrebin “Love Conquers that Con Man” 2003:par. 9). For talent, Disney tapped two of the most successful musical comedy performers of the new century—Kristen Chenoweth and Matthew Broderick. The hope was that that Broderick’s subtle performance would give the love story a chance to blossom.

The missing of the mark in Disney’s logic was that the only way for the love story to be uplifting in Music Man is if Harold Hill is miserable and unhappy conning people. Disney, and star Broderick, gave its audience a cold, unfeeling Hill who gradually finds his humanity through true love—and along the way, saps the life out of “Trouble,” “The Sadder But Wiser Girl,” and all 76 trombones. While TV reviewers enjoyed Kristen Chenoweth’s Marian, critical reaction was mixed, at best, for Broderick’s rendition of Hill; the Times noted that “Mr. Broderick’s effortless charm plays a little too effortless [sic],” and the USA Today reviewer commented disparagingly that “Broderick is a natural choice to star in a TV musical. Just not this musical” (author’s emphasis). Broderick’s strengths, including his boyish, low-key charm, were well-suited for a production that aimed to draw attention away from Professor Hill’s “shenanigans.” What the Disney producers failed to reckon with was the fact that the meat of the show is, for all intents and purposes, precisely those shenanigans. Both the smile and the shoeshine were missing.

For The Music Man to work as well as it possibly can, its perversion of musical comedy structure needs to remain in place—Hill is inevitably contained by the respectable domesticity of the love story, just as he has earlier promised to contain the inherent evil that has infiltrated River City in the form of a pool table. The love story represents not the typical happy climax, but the somewhat deflating anticlimax. In a sense, The Music Man is no more, and no less, a love story than is The Iceman Cometh—love drives the boisterous, fun-loving Hickey to insanity, and Professor Hill to respectability (“I knew you’d come to no good,” Hill jokingly tells Marcellus after learning his former partner has gotten an honest job and settled down with a nice girl—except, perhaps, it is not a joke [30]). Audiences must, and most likely will continue to, settle for a lively first act and the eventual (if symbolic) death of another salesman.

While speculation beyond the time and world of any play is not always constructive, one might wonder how well Hill responds to love, marriage, and domesticity—the same three elements that drove Hickey to murdering his wife.
O’Neill does not give his characters in *Iceman* the chance to live their pipe dreams in the real world, but he did write a short story, “Tomorrow,” published in *The Smart Set* in June of 1917, which provides a possible answer to the question of what happens when a pipe dream comes true. The story concerns Jimmy Anderson, based on the same real-life figure of O’Neill’s wandering and dissipated youth that inspired *Iceman*’s sodden newsman Jimmy Tomorrow. In *Iceman*, Jimmy Tomorrow kills his pipe dream by spending the day sobbing at the docks, unable to throw himself into the river, fully aware that he can never work again. In O’Neill’s early short story, Jimmy Anderson pursues and finally attains a trial job “on one of the big morning papers,” earning the grudging respect of the drunken residents of Tommy the Priest’s (O’Neill 1988: 955). Anderson loses his job, and comes to the identity-crushing realization that he has lost his skill and talent: “I tell you I couldn’t do the work! I tried and tried. What I wrote was rot. I couldn’t get any news. No initiative—no imagination—no character—no courage! All gone” (963). Jimmy’s friends eventually find his dead, broken body on the ground, the result of a suicidal leap from his fire escape, and a precursor to the suicide that young Parritt commits to end *Iceman*. “Tomorrow had come,” O’Neill writes to close the story (967).

For Professor Harold Hill, as a musical-comedy hero, tomorrow never comes—the curtain falls on the happy, march-filled ending. The responsibility of living up to a pipe dream that becomes a reality is, however, a heavy one. *The Music Man*’s gleefully persuasive and percussive rhythm of “harch, harch, harch” contains a human problem more tragic than comic, and perhaps this problem is too big for the musical to comfortably hold. While *Iceman, Death of a Salesman*, and in the 1980s, *Glengarry Glen Ross* may serve as generational markers for the corrosiveness of the all-American profession of salesman, it might well be appropriate to add *The Music Man* to that formidable list of American dramas.

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Endnotes


4 O’Neill, pp. 88-90.

5 The line does not appear in the published libretto, but Preston clearly says it in the movie.


7 For an opposing (that is, positive) review of the production and Broderick’s performance, see Ken Tucker, “Meredith Willson’s The Music Man” Entertainment Weekly (14 February 2003).


References Cited


