

Historical Background & Cultural Context

Laura Swygert - Sophomore - Theatre

Amid the beginnings of the Cold War and Vietnam War, the Civil Rights movement, and the sexual revolution, theatre became an outlet for social and political issues. But, due to the rise of inflation in the war era, commercial theatre was forced to adapt to the demands of a highbrow tastes. It became increasingly difficult for all classes to obtain the funds for personal entertainment; therefore, polarization of class became widely evident in theatre during the 1960s. This influx of high-class audience members encouraged mass forms of entertainment and henceforth the loss of diverse voices. Therefore, musical adaptations of classic European stories like the Sherlock Holmes series became increasingly popular, forming the musical *Baker Street* written by Jerome Coopersmith with music and lyrics by Marian Grudeff and Raymond Jessel.

The 1960s were also the start of the British Invasion phenomenon in which British works gained popularity. The American canon of the 1940s which included *Oklahoma* (1943), *Carousel* (1945), *Kiss Me Kate* (1951), and *Guys and Dolls* (1950), shifted towards musicals with British themes such as *Oliver!* (1960), *Salad Days* (1954), and films such *Mary Poppins* (1964) and *My Fair Lady* (1964). The heavily British-influenced commercial theatre started topping the charts, evoking themes of class and status. These themes, in turn, welcomed increased audience numbers, allowing for the inflation of ticket sales.

The importance of mass popularity is crucial in a big-budget production. As William J. Baumol and William G. Bowen analyzed in their 1966 study “Performing Arts - The Economic Dilemma”, “costs inevitably mount; revenues do not keep pace” (Baumol). Thus, in order to boost revenue, inflation of ticket sales is unavoidable. The average Broadway Orchestra ticket in 1955-1956 was \$4.90; by 1965-1966 the same ticket ranged from \$6.25-\$7.50 (Corthron 44). While this does not seem out extravagant based on today’s minimum \$75 ticket, the transition counts for about a 45% increase. By 1975, the same ticket would be \$15 (Corthron 44). The 1960s were only the start of an increased raise in ticket prices, leading to class polarization in the entertainment industry. The production of *Baker Street* is only one example of a big budget 1960s Broadway show, leaning into the popularity of a higher class for ticket sales; others included Jerry Herman’s *Hello Dolly* (1965).

Producer Alexander Cohan’s work in promoting the production along with Hal Prince only added to this enthusiasm; Cohan employed lavish marketing unprecedented to Broadway. He implemented a very hands-on approach as evident in the introduction of a two-page color ad in *Playbill*, lit animated marquee, and employment of actors dressed up as Holmes walking around the city (Cohen iii). The production even implemented a dress code for its premiere in which women wore gowns and men had suits to give the allure of class and prestige. The response, however, was heavily mixed, and the dress code was later disbanded.

The appeal to a highbrow lifestyle, as displayed in Cohan’s advertisement, allowed for a polarization of class in theatre which perhaps led to a boom in regional theatre. Regional theatres were the hub of social commentary and activist theatre, and served expanded theatre from a centralized northeast to the midwest and even west coast. Despite the resurgence of regional theatre, the commercial platform remains the most crucial in disseminating information and

training future actors and designers. The re-imagination of Sherlock Holmes into *Baker Street* is simply another example of Broadway producers presenting an upper-class white man's story to an all-too-white audience.

Works Cited:

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