

Lyrical Analysis Emily McGinn, Religion

The musical *Tip Top* was written as a musical revue: a multi-act performance with many different music performances, dances, and sketches and found its popularity in the late 1910's. *Tip Top* was produced by Burnside in 1920 at the height of the musical revue. Typical of the 1920's musical, there is a slight plot to *Tip Top*, following the story of a local store and a trial, with the main protagonist being handyman Tip Top (Bordman et al. 405). The musical opens during the trial of fairy-turned-cat Miss Puff. The trial is presided over by Judge Tiger, the most honorable in the land. The trial centers on Miss Puff, who failed to perform the wedding of Dick and Alice. Alice is the daughter of the store owner where Dick works. The character Tip Top witnesses two men, Skinnem and Barker, try to withhold five million dollars that belongs to Dick. While this serves as the main conflict, there are many other subplots and sketches within the musical that do not contribute to the overall plot, which is typical of the style for a musical revue.

The overall musical style of the show consists of very upbeat, positive numbers with a simple story line. For example, "The Girl Who Keeps Me Guessing" is a song sung by the romantic of Cyril and Nina about why they are attracted to each other (Caldwell et al. 12). This is one of many songs in the musical that describes the romantic life of particular pairing throughout the show, and enhances the common theme of young love. Moreover, the finale of the show consists of a song entitled "Tip-Top" does not offer an overall conclusion to the show but rather describes who Tip-Top is as a character and how he functions as a hero (Caldwell et al. 20). Rather than unite the characters during the finale using a plot point, they rally around a character. However, the most unusual number of the show occurs in the very beginning. The opening song, "Cat Song" (Caldwell et al. 1), sets the scene of the court trial and opens with an elaborate number to set the stage of the cat world the musical exists in. It is reproduced from the libretto below.

"Cat Song"

*Meow! Meow! The Cats are congregated for a cat-a-ract of crime,
Meow! Meow! As they meet in the cat-a-combs in cata-clysmic times.
Meow! Meow! The Cats will cat-a-chize offenders and each poor-cat-paw.*

The opening of these three lines, beginning with the meow sounds, establishes the character style of the cats. The cats create a fictional layer to the work and tell the audience this musical does not operate in the real world. Furthermore, all the cat puns add an element of comedy to the song. The dashes in the words reveal how the singers must change the pronunciation of the words so that the word cat is clearly heard and emphasized. The first two lines also rhyme creating a catchy song that the audience can easily follow along with them:

*Now the court of chatty crimes begins –
Hear the cat-a-logue of sins –
Before the cat- pillars of the law.
The Catty Cater- pillars of the law.*

This section of this song continues to enhance this fictional world of cats and establishes their system of justice in a lighthearted way. The Cats are leading moral figures of the society and preside over the law. The cat puns continue in this section, allowing the song to retain the light, comedic element of it all. While this song does set the stage of a courtroom scene, the lyrics make it evident that this is not a very serious trial and that this world is very silly and fun. The rhyming also continues in this section with the first two lines and the third and fourth lines.

*Meow! Tabby and Tom hither will come –
Purring and crying and growling –*

In these two lines, the first mention of any characters in the show. The meow at the beginning establishes that the characters are cats. Also the names give way to the cat idea because Tabby and Tom are both breeds of cats. The actions of purring, crying, and growling further emphasizes the fact that Tabby and Tom are cats, but can also give them characterization, especially in contrast to the characters mentioned in the next section of the song. These cats seem to be more sensitive and upset, according to their actions. Moreover, unlike the previous section, these two lines do not rhyme, but this could be due to the way that the lines are sung.

*Tiger and Maltese – striped with fleas –
Meowing and rowing and growling.*

Two more characters are mentioned in this section, again the inclusion of meow establishes them as cats. The characters of Tiger and Maltese are again named after breeds of cats. Tiger being the more important, the judge in this musical, because of his name being that of a big cat breed. The lyrics also specifically point out that these cats have fleas, which the audience most likely would find funny and adds to the character's animal portrayal. Tiger and Maltese seem to be less sensitive than Tabby and Tom because they meow and row rather than purr and cry, however all cats in this world apparently growl.

The Cat Song works as a nice opener for *Tip Top*, and it encapsulates the idea while the musical has an overall plot, each song focuses on something different. For example, the high emphasis on cats is never revisited in any other song, and essentially is unimportant for the rest of the musical. Furthermore, this song highlights the funny, upbeat nature of not only this musical, but most of the 1920's. Audiences are there for the spectacle that comes along with each show, not for the plot or a deep social meaning in the work. This musical is pure fun and is meant for audiences to have a relaxing, enjoyable evening.

Works Cited:

Bordman, Gerald Martin, and Richard C. Norton. *American Musical Theatre: a Chronicle*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

Caldwell, Anne, R.H. Burnside, and Ivan Caryll. *Tip Top*. 1920. Theatrical Script