

**The 'Dharma Musical'**  
**Converting Broadway to Buddhism**

By

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## Introduction

In my ill-lit college dorm room, I lay in bed on my stomach reading, for the second time that semester, *One Singular Sensation: The Michael Bennett Story*. Bennett, creator and choreographer behind my favorite musical *A Chorus Line*, led a challenging but iconically artistic life in the entertainment industry. His greatest success was *Chorus Line*, which opened at the Shubert Theatre in 1975 and eventually became the longest running American musical on Broadway. While I have always resonated with the piece, I became fascinated about its origin story after making my own Broadway debut at the Shubert in 2013, more than three decades after Bennett's presence. Years later I would learn, in a wildly coincidental conversation with her, that my dressing room station originally belonged to Donna Drake, the original Tricia who also understudied leading lady Cassie. It seemed too good to be true that not only had my dream of performing in a musical on Broadway had become a reality, but I had accomplished this in a space I considered practically sacred due to its history and the impact of *A Chorus Line*.

Performing in the arts has been my one true love since I was graced with newborn-sized tap shoes and grew up in my mother's dance studio. This profession allows artists to do what makes them whole, but also bestow the gift of story, community, and light unto vast audiences. Unlike the industries of music or visual arts, musical theatre incorporates several artistic aspects to create something live, original, and impermanent. This impermanence arises from varied circumstances including a consistent flow of new audiences and the ever-changing humanness of the actors themselves. Every experience is new and un-lived, unable to be reproduced. Good, *authentic* musical theatre (a phrase I will elaborate more on in later pages), specifically and based upon my knowledge and experience, creates a space for those partaking — both artist and

audience — to find aspects of themselves within a story, thus resulting in reflection and inspiration. This kind of art is powerful because of its ability to permeate so many people's minds, lives, and perceptions. Whether or not action is taken as a result from a production's inspiration, a musical plot or composition's thought-provoking nature is powerful in itself.

Upon my reluctant arrival at college, just shy of seventeen years old, I was required to take a writing course and was randomly assigned a professor and a concentration: Buddhism and counterculture. I would soon learn Buddhism is not simply confined to the term religion, but is in total reality a guide toward a more mindful way of living. This, for lack of better words, blew my mind and I was instantly hooked. The universality and wholeness of Buddhist concepts such as *dukkha* and impermanence resonated with me, and I began to adopt some of its guidelines into my life. Over the course of my next two years I ended up enrolling in three more Buddhism-centered courses, all of which, I feel, made me a better human and a better artist. In one particular assignment, we were asked to think about pieces of art or literature through a Buddhist lens. This is the moment my mind returned to Michael Bennett. I had remembered reading in his biography that *A Chorus Line* was created after a meeting among his friends, each member a fellow performer, most of which identified as Buddhist. Sitting in a circle they talked, meditated, chanted, and most importantly, recorded it. It was from those tapes that Michael Bennett birthed the concept and eventual script for *Chorus Line*. It was then I asked myself: *Is Chorus Line primarily Buddhist inspired?*

With more research (and many more Buddhism writing assignments) I had found a connection. Buddhist concepts run through the veins of an abundance of musical theatre pieces. Furthermore, I believe and will continue to argue these pieces are held at a level of authenticity

that others are not. Anytime I had spoken about this parallel I was met with a sea of confusion. I knew then and am still aware now that it is my job to shift those glances from uncertainty to reflection. From doubt to inspiration. From hesitance to power.

## **Methods**

In order to best understand the analyses of the chosen range of musical theatre, and due to the limited field work in this area of research, a documentary analysis approach will be taken. Within this method I will first introduce and describe the prerequisites and framework for each concept and production in hopes to provide the most fundamental information one may require in understanding my thesis. I will then analyze said productions utilizing the presentations of any and all Buddhist undertones previously described. Finally, I will contextualize this information in terms of authenticity, emphasizing the significance of my research in both academic and artistic settings.

## **Musical Theatre**

While the structural elements of musical theatre are imperative to the marketability and overall opening of a production, they do not weigh heavily in this particular analysis. However, a crucial comprehension in the experiential aspect of attending a musical must be addressed.

### *Dharma Musical*

The evolution of musical theatre, and specifically Broadway, has been one to surprise audiences for decades and keep them coming back for more. According to Broadway League statistics, more than fourteen million people attended Broadway shows during the 2018-2019 season. A singular production is capable of bringing in well over one million dollars per week,

thus proving the public is still very much engaged (The Broadway League). Audience members may enter a theatre expecting simply to be entertained, but then leave a changed human being. The primary purpose of musical theatre again, as per my experience and understanding, is to make connections with audiences through compositions and story, allowing someone to see their own story reflected in moments and characters on stage. This is a response to a craved visibility and universality. This can aid in humans creating/discovering meaning in an otherwise impermanent existence.

As a result of sustaining large audiences from a myriad of backgrounds, certain productions have the power to consistently relay messages and information to those fourteen million attendees. However, this does not mean each production brought to Broadway is completely capable of exuding a genuine, connective response from the audience. Broadway is a business and with this process in mind, authenticity and the mission of reaching audiences in this way is often lost. This is where the Buddhist tradition steps into light. Core themes in Buddhism provide guidelines, in a sense, to living the healthiest life possible that can ultimately result in liberation from daily eternal suffering. Buddhists are detached from the illusory environment of the physical world and perceive the world through a sense of blunt clarity. They express themselves in very human ways, highlighting this suffering, separation, and impermanence. These themes can arise through the creative process and, as stated above, become evident in the qualities of particular roles, with or without intention, to produce intensely authentic performances. I connected, through research and experience, the art form of musical theatre to meditative practices, as they both expand one's consciousness and reflective abilities in some capacity.

That being said, it is here I aim to present a newfound term/concept: *dharma musical*. Through my personal research and in alignment with the Bercholz text, I have concluded ‘dharma’ refers to a universal truth or underlying fundamental reality. It can also represent ideas on the path Buddhists follow in leading a life toward wellness and enlightenment. The similar term *dharma movie* has been shared among philosophers analyzing this discussion of undertones in film. One notable example can be found in *Why Buddhism Is True*, a book written by journalist and evolutionary psychologist Robert Wright. He begins this work by appointing *The Matrix* to be a classic “dharma movie”, as it allegorically captures the human condition in terms of a Buddhist’s path, specifically their sentiment on the topic of illusion. This 1999 science-fiction film depicts leading man Neo’s discovery of inhabiting a dream world, where his physical body inhabits a pod. Morpheus, rebel from the ‘real’ world, enters Neo’s illusory life and offers him a chance to see reality. Taking Morpheus’ red pill awakens him, while a blue pill returns him to his pod. In other words, the red pill represents a Buddhist’s mindset and an escape from our illusory (un)reality, while the blue pill represents our ignorance and complacency. Given the film’s run time of two hours and thirty minutes it is clear Neo takes the red pill, as I am sure audiences would not be as interested in watching Keanu Reeves asleep in a goop-filled pod for that amount of time. Western Buddhists prior to *The Matrix*’s debut believed all beings rested in an illusion of reality, and mindfulness and meditative practice was a way in which to escape this. With this knowledge, one is able to extract themes parallel to the path and fundamentals of the tradition and express them as dharmic presentations of art. Thus, any musical production of theatrical nature capturing one or more Buddhist ideals - to be discussed in further detail in the

upcoming Buddhism section - as well as a sense of authenticity upon experiencing can and will be considered a dharma musical.

## **Authenticity**

Finally, I feel it necessary to provide you with a personal definition of what I consider authentic. A piece is deemed authentic when it reflects the human condition. It calls attention to universal emotions ranging in depth such as love or fear or sadness. The story may even appear to be driven by these sincere emotions. An authentic production possesses public recognition and success in some capacity (i.e. award nominations, legacies). While authenticity is not determined solely on this basis, external validations do contribute to a production's overall evaluation.

Authenticity can be produced by particular actors or the developed characters being portrayed.

## **Buddhism**

It is essential, in immersing oneself into this particular analysis, to grasp the succeeding core themes of the Buddhist tradition I will eventually argue to be underscored in theatrical productions. These concepts will be scrutinized in their most basic articulations.

### *Four Noble Truths*

The most basic teachings of the Buddha can be summed into the Four Noble Truths (Bercholz), in which followers of these realities that build upon each other will be guided through a spiritual life leading toward enlightenment. While there are a multitude of variations in phrasing, each edition conveys equivalent ideas. I have comprised the particular language stated



below to express the Four Noble Truths from my research and personal interpretation of the information.

- 1) All sentient life entails suffering.
- 2) The cause of suffering is attachment/craving.
- 3) The way to be free from suffering is to eliminate the cause or root of suffering.
- 4) The way to eliminate the cause or root of suffering is to follow the Noble Eight Fold Path.

The first truth introduces the concept of sentient life which simply refers to a being with the ability to feel and perceive things. This truth declares that each moment of life holds a sense of suffering, or *dukkha* in Pali, both positive and negative experiences. While this seems bleak, Buddhists intend for this foundation to constitute discontentment, or highlight how much of an uncontrollable roller coaster life can be. It is meant to relieve anxieties about the bumps you endure along the way, and assure its simplicity and eventual decline. It is the most fundamental theme throughout all central teachings of the Buddha, and is necessary to understand in one's journey toward enlightenment. The second truth affirms attachment, *tanha* in Pali, and craving to be the reason for suffering. As humans, we crave more than we think. This could take the form of wanting more money, heightened success at work, or even primitive sexual desire. Attachment is the searching for happiness outside of oneself. Cravings attach us to strong emotions paired with expectations, often risking unfulfillment. The third is merely the recognition to eliminate the identified *tanha*. Finally, the fourth truth outlines the process in which this elimination takes place. The Buddhist tradition designates this process as The Eight Fold Path. Although this is an essential step in achieving nirvana, it is not completely relevant in understanding my particular research.

## *The Four Seals*

The first three of the Four Seals (Bercholz) will be touched upon further in my analysis and are, therefore, necessary to dissect. These seals consist of the following ideas:

- 1) All compounded things are impermanent.
- 2) All attached emotions are painful.
- 3) All phenomena are without inherent existence.

The word ‘compounded’ in the first seal is indicative of something complex, made up of several things, and refers in this context to humans and experiences. This seal, almost as vital to the Buddhist tradition as the first Noble Truth, claims these compounded things to be impermanent. Impermanence is undeniable, and is reflected in the fluctuation of everyday life. Tibetan Buddhist Pema Chodron writes about this flux and constant change in the first chapter of her book entitled *Living Beautifully with Uncertainty and Change*, where she claims that humans’ “attempts to find lasting pleasure, lasting security, are at odds with the fact that we’re a part of a dynamic system in which everything and everyone is in process.” (3) Furthermore, the acknowledgement of this impermanence presents an interesting paradox, where this action is both a condition of anxiety and freedom from anxiety. One, possibly the majority, may feel increased worry in recognizing that change is indeed existent and uncontrollable. This same notion, however, could bring another person peace, a comfort in letting go, surrendering to a higher power. Nonetheless, impermanence is primarily referred to as a form of suffering and is paramount within the tradition of Buddhism.

The second of the Four Seals, all attached emotions are painful, aligns closely with the core of The Four Noble Truths in identifying attachment as the cause for suffering. This seal

develops from the first, claiming since emotions are considered compounded they are in constant flux. With this being true these emotions are impermanent. Since impermanence is seen as a form of suffering, they are perceived as painful.

The third seal takes on a more metaphysical emphasis. It is important to note that in this context ‘phenomena’ pertains to any things appearing to the senses and ‘inherent’ pertains to the essence or nature of one thing only. With this knowledge, one can conclude this seal describes a kind of interconnectivity throughout the universe. One thing, phenomena, cannot exist alone. They, especially humans and other sentient lifeforms, are dependent upon each other and their actions. Without these inner-relations phenomena become empty, or nonexistent nothingness.

### *Three Marks of Existence*

The last of the numerically grouped teachings are The Three Marks of Existence (Bercholz) which represent the Buddha’s most basic descriptions for the reality of all sentient beings, the first two being impermanence (*annica* in Pali) and suffering (*dukkha*). These two marks represent the concept of fluctuation and the first of the Four Noble Truths, respectively. As previously discussed, both serve as key elements in establishing the foundational core themes of the tradition.

The third Mark of Existence, presumably the most challenging of the core themes to grasp, introduces another new, more metaphysical theory conceived as nonself (*anatta* in Pali), or egolessness. The ‘self’, in its simplest form, is personality or what makes a person the way that they are. This can then be divided into five groupings, or *skandhas* in Sanskrit, that make up the ‘self’: form, feeling, perception, concept, and consciousness. Since each skandha is capable of both *dukkha* and *annica*, the Buddha claims liberation is achievable if the ‘self’ is eliminated.

Mark Siderits, philosopher and author of *Buddhism as Philosophy*, investigates this abandonment of one's essence throughout this composition. He pulls from the Buddha's texts, as well as the perspective of seventeenth century philosopher Rene Descartes and concludes that our 'self' is the mind, or conscious state, alone with no connection to the complexities of the body. It can be described as "a substance that thinks" that is "immaterial by nature." (Siderits 41) One's consciousness formulates an illusory picture of the physical world and simply borrows the body we inhabit when in this state.

Tibetan Buddhist Chogyam Trungpa writes about the 'self' in a more Western fashion in his piece "The Development of Ego". Here, he suggests that at some point the notion of duality emerges and differentiates the five skandhas from one another, creating separation. There is "something else" other than the 'self' or what we refer to traditionally as identity. (Trungpa in Bercholz 73) Trungpa provides a metaphor to more clearly describe this notion. "Our most fundamental state of mind, before the creation of ego," he writes, "is such that there is basic openness, basic freedom, a spatial quality". (74) One then comes to terms with the skandha of consciousness and attempts to categorize and identify the separation between themselves and the details of their environment. Trungpa connects this idea with the analogy of dancing in an open space, and being one with it. With egolessness, this open space is inhabited by a kind of intelligence that does not draw distinctions between what *is* and what *is not* itself (Trungpa in Bercholz).

In sum and simplicity, anatta suggests humans to be products of causes, repercussions, or interconnectivities as detailed in the third seal. Beings and their skandhas are in constant states of flux all because of the impermanence across the universe.

## *Interdependence*

The Sanskrit term *pratitya samutpada* (Bercholz) is commonly translated as interdependence or dependent co-origination. Interdependence relates to a kind of interconnection that exists among the universe. In Buddhist tradition, this term refers to what is recognizably the idea of ‘cause and effect’, X leads to Y and so forth, a chain of events and resulting outcomes unfold.

## *Nature*

*The world grows smaller and smaller, more and more interdependent...today more than ever before life must be characterized by a sense of Universal Responsibility not only nation to nation and human to human, but also human to other forms of life.*

*-The Dalai Lama*

In areas of the world where Buddhism is prevalent, specifically Thailand, farmers make up the majority and create a rural, agricultural life for themselves and their communities. Nature and Earth’s surface has been widely respected and worshipped, as Buddhists set these values at the forefront of their practice. It is said the Buddha himself spent most of his life and journey toward enlightenment in nature and forests, specifically under trees, taking part in contemplation and meditation. The location at which Siddhartha Gautama became The Buddha, known as the Bodhi Tree, is a sacred symbol within this practice. It is important to note the term ‘sentient beings’, quite oftenly used in reference to this tradition, does not solely refer to human life, but rather all living things that exist and grow (plants, animals, organisms, etc.). In Buddhism, “nature was never treated as something 'outside' the human realm but rather as an extension of human love. These ideas are linked to the attitude of respect for nature amongst the buddhist

community”. (Johnson) Conservation, preservation, and respect for nature possesses a value, a sacredness in the life of a buddhist.

### *Nirvana*

While my theatrical selections may not candidly possess specific undertones of nirvana, this concept is critical in one’s complete comprehension of Buddhism and will be referred to frequently, thus I feel its inclusion is worthy in this discussion. Nirvana represents the attainment of enlightenment. For a sentient being, this means reaching the highest state of peace and wellbeing, as well as the cessation of dukkha for eternity. Some feel inclined to perceive this achievement as an awakening of the mind from the delusion of self or ego. In a sense, nirvana acts as an extinction into another realm of existence, departing from a cycle of reincarnation. An individual successful in attaining nirvana is then considered a Buddha.

## **Musical Analysis**

I have chosen six productions - five musicals and one play with music - to analyze. Each production embraces a number of core Buddhist ideas and illustrates a sense of authenticity in its own, unique way. The following chosen productions are quite significant in examining this discussion: *Spring Awakening*, *A Chorus Line*, *Avenue Q*, *If/Then*, *Flower Drum Song*, and *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*.

### *Spring Awakening*

Originating in 2006 at the Eugene O’Neill Theatre, *Spring Awakening* tells the story of several adolescent Germans living in the late 19th Century who lack the knowledge of, yet

nevertheless experience, teenage sexual angst and repression. My analysis will follow details of this tale, as well as the primary characters of Melchior, Moritz, and Ilse.

Writers Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik first met in the Buddhist organization *Soka Gakkai*. They meditated and chanted together for years before developing *Spring Awakening*. Their knowledge of this way of living is attributed to the overall state of the production. Sater and Sheik chose to focus on the Buddhist tenet that acknowledging the ‘dark side’, or suffering, is the first step in overcoming it. This acknowledgement refers to the first of the Four Noble Truths - all sentient life entails suffering. A prominent instance of this is *Spring*’s final scene, where leading man Melchior discovers the gravestones of his best friend and the love of his life. He first intends on committing suicide, but instead is uplifted by their spirits and summons the strength to move forward, accepting and conquering his suffering.

The next two Noble Truths deal with eliminating attachment, the root of eternal suffering. This is depicted in the following of Moritz’s character. His confusion over his own sexuality, along with his strict, uncompassionate father’s cruel response to him receiving an undeserved failing grade on his midterm result in Moritz running away from home. In the woods he meets Ilse, who has fled from her sexually abusive father. She is the least corrupt of all the characters, primarily because she is both emotionally and geographically detached from society. While Ilse continues freely into the woods, Moritz eventually commits suicide. This subplot trailing Ilse and Moritz in *Spring* exemplifies the differences between a character who exhibits attached behavior and one who does not. The Buddha’s sutra “Dart of Painful Feeling” notes that there are two types of feelings, “a bodily one and a mental one.” (The Buddha in Bodhi 31) He then goes on to compare each of these feelings with the contact of a dart. A being who is attached will physically

feel the first dart, and then become conscious of the sensation from a second dart and react accordingly. However, if a being is instructed in terms of Buddhist teachings, only one dart would be acknowledged, the “bodily one”. By rejecting the second dart, said being becomes detached from the sensation, or “mental” reaction. This act of rejection accurately describes Ilse’s mentality on being sexually assaulted and her decision to continue her life in the woods, versus Moritz’s tragic demise. Ilse endured a distressing ‘dart’, but unknowingly applied the teachings of the Buddha to become detached from it. This allowed her to survive any suffering and continue on a more mindful path of survival.

### *A Chorus Line*

*A Chorus Line* follows seventeen dancers through a rigorous audition process, all competing for spots in the chorus. Rather than casting solely based on skill and talent, Zach the director decides to focus on each dancer’s personal background and uniqueness, demanding insight into their individual human experiences. The Shubert Theatre housed the original production of *A Chorus Line* in 1975, starring director and choreographer Michael Bennett as Zach.

Similar to *Spring Awakening*, the creative team of the 1975 musical also had backgrounds in Buddhism. The production’s first unofficial rehearsal consisted of a myriad of dancers coming together for a group therapy session where they danced, meditated, and chanted. The majority of the dancers considered themselves Buddhist at the time, one of whom was Nicholas Dante, a Buddhist whose real life inspired the role of Paul in *Chorus Line*. Dante’s story transformed into a monologue performed by Paul in the show, and is known to be one of the most heart-



wrenching, authentic pieces of text in musical theatre today (Appendix A). His words have remained untouched since that first meeting, and have successfully reached audiences globally. In this scene he recounts his troubling past of abuse, sexuality, and his admiration for performing. Paul's emotional scars had inadvertently proposed a struggle in regards to the 'self' and his attachment to those traumatic experiences. In a Buddhist sense, Paul was not 'dancing in an open space' as Chogyam Trungpa suggests, but rather (unintentionally) denies distinction between his 'self' and his sufferings. Speaking candidly it seems quite impossible, especially when speaking of trauma, to become aware of this separation, as humans are not designed to perceive pain in this way. Nonetheless, Paul's monologue and internal struggle becomes a moment in theatre history in which evokes empathy and reflection, both valuable in expressing the human condition.

One of the final compositions displays a Buddhist undertone of quite clarity. The final ballad of the production is sung after Zach proposes the following question to the group: *What would you do if you couldn't dance anymore?* Many begin to approach this with humor in attempts to divert such consuming emotions, but as the intensity increases it is clear these performers do not have an answer. Their passion is much too strong and the cast sings "What I Did For Love". Similarly to Paul's monologue, the lyrics point toward the undertone of 'self'. In a more general sense, these lyrics serve as a bittersweet love song being sung to their passion, their talents, their lives. While they might not be able to actively participate in this career in a literal sense, their love will never fade, however their identity can. Their passion and dedication has blurred the lines between 'individual who performers' and 'performer'. To answer Zach's question is to admit if dance is gone, a piece of them goes with it.

More specifically, one of the lyrics reads “the gift was ours to borrow”. If one is aware of this production’s Buddhist background, this line can be interpreted when assessing the concept of the ‘self’ or ‘ego’. The ‘self’, in its simplest form, is personality or what makes a person the way that they are. This can then be divided into the five *skandhas* that make up the ‘self’: form, feeling, perception, concept, and consciousness. The Buddha claims liberation is achievable if the ‘self’ is eliminated. Mark Siderits, philosopher and author of *Buddhism as Philosophy*, investigates this abandonment of one’s ‘essence’ throughout this composition. He pulls from the Buddha’s texts, as well as the perspective of sixteenth century philosopher Descartes and concludes that our ‘self’ is the mind, or conscious state, not the body. It can be described as “a substance that thinks” that is “immaterial by nature.” (Siderits 41) One’s consciousness formulates an illusory picture of the physical world and simply ‘borrows’ the body we inhabit when in this state. Therefore, in the line “the gift was ours to borrow”, the ‘gift’ is the physical act of that individual dancer’s passion and talent for the artform. They are ‘borrowing’ their tangible bodies and skill until reincarnation occurs, transposing those ‘selves’ into another state of existence.

Even *Chorus Line*’s scenic design can be interpreted through a Buddhist lens, as it was no accident the stage was open and bare containing only five mirrored panels (see Appendix B). Tibetan Buddhist Chogyam Trungpa writes about the ‘self’ in a more Western fashion in his piece “The Development of Ego”. Here, he suggests that at some point the notion of duality emerges and differentiates the five skandhas from one another, creating separation. There is “something else” other than the ‘self’ or what we refer to traditionally as identity. (Trungpa in Bercholz 73) Trungpa provides a metaphor to more clearly describe this notion. “Our most

fundamental state of mind, before the creation of ego,” he states, “is such that there is basic openness, basic freedom, a spatial quality”. (74) One then comes to terms with the skandha of consciousness and attempts to categorize or identify the separation between themselves and the details of their environment. Trungpa connects this idea with the analogy of dancing in an open space, and being one with it. The seventeen auditionees are exceptionally passionate about the art of dancing, and this is conveyed by allowing them to dance freely on an empty stage, just as the metaphor depicts. They typically face away from the mirrors, as those are a reminder of duality, or recognition of the ‘self’. Looking in a mirror you see ‘your’ reflection, or the reflection of a ‘self’ you have differentiated from the rest of the space, the rest of the world.

### *Avenue Q*

The children’s puppet television program *Sesame Street* is to thank for the creation of *Avenue Q*, a musical incorporating similar puppetry, but so mature they provide a trigger warning advising children under the age of twelve not to attend. This is the story of recent college graduate and leading puppet Princeton, and his quest to find a stable job, true love, and his ultimate purpose in life. I think it is safe to say Broadway was all but prepared for their run, beginning in 2003 at the Golden Theatre.

At first glance, this production seems to have little to no correlation with Buddhism, however, philosophers have found the finale to strike chords relating to one of the three marks of existence: impermanence. Pema Chodron specifically writes about how we and the world around us are constantly changing in her piece called “The Fundamental Ambiguity of Being Human”. Princeton’s journey throughout the show aligns closely with Chodron’s insights, as she claims

that humans' "attempts to find lasting pleasure, lasting security, are at odds with the fact that we're a part of a dynamic system in which everything and everyone is in process." (Chodron 3)

This is what causes typical anxieties and concerns. Princeton was almost blinded by this search for answers, but eventually makes it around to discovering just how much things evolve, including himself. It can be argued Princeton's quest to make his mark and obtain significance alludes to his search for stability, or permanence, which we have learned, according to Buddhism, does not exist and, therefore, cannot be achieved. *Avenue Q* ends with a song entitled "For Now" where the puppets sing the following lyrics:

"Each time you smile / It'll only last a while."

"Life may be scary / But it's only temporary."

This production delivers an evident undertone of impermanence, while being disguised as a production that simply relies on comedy and satire. It, in fact, approached deep, insightful topics under the category of mere entertainment, and has been playing successfully for full audiences since 2003.

### *If/Then*

*If/Then* accounts the life of one Elizabeth Vaughn, recently divorced and unemployed. The direction of her life is split between two paths, both are possible outcomes resulting from a difference in decision - one career oriented, and one focused on love and relationship. The production moves through Elizabeth's parallel storylines over the duration of many years, and highlights the significance of choice through this duality. Brian Yorkey, lyricist and book writer of *If/Then*, took a variety of courses in the area of Buddhism at Columbia University. He created,

along with score writer Tom Kitt, the musical starring Idina Menzel, which opened at the Richard Rodgers Theatre in 2013. While it is not explicitly stated by Yorkey that his studies at Columbia and eventual artistic writings worked in tandem, Buddhist connections are prevalent in the production's overall themes and design.

*If/Then* depicts choice and resulting outcome, cause and effect. Each decision Elizabeth makes affects the world around her. In the first parallel, Elizabeth declines a phone call from her old friend Lucas, continues on in the park with her other friend Kate, and by the end of the timeline receives a job working on a developmental project in Manhattan. In the second parallel, Elizabeth accepts Lucas' phone call, becomes pregnant with his child (which she later aborts), and turns down the developmental job to run for New York City Council. The Buddhist undertone instantiated through this plot is closest connected to *pratitya samutpada*, or interdependence. Not only are Elizabeth's immediate world and relationships altered, but this in turn affects the stories of others. According to the concept of interdependence, connectivity is universal. Each sentient being lives individually and thus creates a chain of events that lead to others' decisiveness and outcomes. In the tune "Ain't No Man Manhattan" in Act One, Elizabeth and her close circle of friends sing the lyrics:

"Ain't no "I" in island / anywhere on earth."

"How much you love your life is / what every life is worth."

"Your answer is my question. / My cause is your effect."

"We're all in this together. / Yeah, we all connect."

Including interdependence as an undertone to this story-telling exemplifies the significant role Buddhism can hold in an overall piece.

Elizabeth's dichotomous fate can be linked to the theme of duality, often discussed in the Buddhist practice. In addition and alignment with *A Chorus Line*, scenic design exhibits this undertone of duality (see Appendix C). Producer David Stone discussed external design in an interview with the Wall Street Journal, explaining "the set, like everything else about the show, is conceptual, and a giant mirrored wall swings up and down throughout the production to underscore the theme of duality." The thoughtfulness poured into each facet of production reflects the mindful aspects of Buddhist teachings.

### *Flower Drum Song*

In 1958, Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Flower Drum Song* opened on Broadway at the St. James Theatre. Set in San Francisco's Chinatown, this musical comedy follows a Chinese man, Wang Ta, and includes themes of assimilation, tradition, identity, and love. Wang Ta finds love in multiple women throughout the duration of the story, but struggles to come to terms with his Chinese values in a Western society, and how such perspectives play a role in his romantic relationships.

As previously discussed, Tibetan Buddhist Chogyam Trungpa's notion of the self reveals the emergence of a kind of duality. This lack of oneness results in attaching identity to an already spacious sentient being. Trungpa suggests sentient beings do not condense to their identities or attributes that account for one's personality. Beings are egoless, 'self'-less, and one with space (as outlined in his dancing metaphor). It is only until one or more of the five skandhas become activated that separation and identification take form. This is illustrated in the lead's internal conflict throughout the story. Wang Ta grapples with his American self and his Chinese self, and

the qualities that categorize such values. Ta sings two solos that are reflective of this split narrative. His first, entitled “You Are Beautiful” occurs at the beginning of the production and displays his Chinese self. Qualities such as timbre, or tone, hold high significance in traditional Chinese music. This song is more reserved and simplistic in both melody and timbre, aligning with traditional Chinese musical values. On the other hand, “You Are Beautiful”’s opposite piece and Ta’s second solo “Like A God” communicates his American self. This song is much more powerful in tone and tempo, and is sung to a Western dressed woman of his affections much later on in the progression of his story. Without the activation of his skandha(s) this internal conflict and dualistic narrative would not take place. Therefore, one is able to discern an undertone of self and identity from Wang Ta’s musical journey.

Buddhism outlines significant respect for and interconnectivity with nature and other nonhuman lifeforms. Rodgers and Hammerstein’s lyrics to “A Hundred Million Miracles” “include references to the natural world: rain, rivers, flowers, birds, wind, and so forth. The entire effect is one of quiet restraint (even contemplativeness), connectedness to nature, and a foreignness that is charming but not unnecessarily jolting”. (Ponti 152) With this credit to nature comes contemplativeness, which one can only help but attribute to the Buddha’s connection to trees and meditation, specifically sacred The Bodhi Tree. Whether unintentional or cleverly purposed, this crystalline undertone of nature and sentient life is present and contributes to this overall analysis.

Not only did *Flower Drum Song* impact the lives of audience members, but one particular dancer made his dreams a reality thanks to this production. Finis Jhung grew up in Hawaii watching dancers in black and white films. Although he could not train extensively until later in

his life, Jhung became a talented dancer and teacher sought out by Rodgers and Hammerstein themselves. After receiving a telegram from the legendary Broadway duo inviting him to audition, he was cast in *Flower Drum Song*. After his time with the production, he devoted himself entirely to Buddhism and began teaching dance on the side. His classes became most popular and his techniques were magic, eventually leading Jhung to open a studio of his own. He was very open about applying Buddhist principles to his work, saying, “we believe that all people are entitled to enlightenment, that all people have potential.” (37) Going further, he applied this notion to dance. This sparked his fascination with teaching beginners and came to the realization “if you can get an adult beginner to start to reveal some of the essence of ballet, the line and the positions, then you will understand what it is to teach.” (37) His purpose became clear: provide potential dancers with fundamentals and techniques to grow beyond the confines of what was seen as being ‘good’. Finis Jhung abides by the following guiding philosophy:

“If your mind is in a good place, your body will be better. In Buddhism, we say that mind and body are one. If teachers create an atmosphere in class where the movement is meaningful, where students can see and feel improvements and where they can start to listen and respond to the music, then class becomes a positive experience. Most students danced around the house as children--let's go back to that child who just loves to move.” (37)

Loosely based on the principles of self (a similar discussion seen previously in the analysis of *A Chorus Line*) Jhung’s connection with Buddhist teachings bleeds into his artistic motivations and endeavors. While it is unclear whether or not *Flower Drum Song* had a direct impact on the



stylings of his eventual teaching career, Jhung was immersed in Buddhist practice enough for its contribution to appear and present his most meaningful, lucrative art.

### *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*

The wildly beloved *Harry Potter* series, created by author JK Rowling, changed the world of fandom and literature for generations to come, selling hundreds of millions of copies around the world. The book series of seven and respective films established a franchise that has held strong for decades. So when it was announced the story would continue on stage, fans went mad. *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* is the eighth story, picking up the moment the seventh left off - Harry, Ron, and Hermione grown and sending their children off to their first year at Hogwarts. It follows Harry's middle son, Albus, and his journey navigating through Hogwarts, fighting against any dark magic lurking in the wizarding world, and like his heroic dad, discovering the magnitude of unlikely friendship.

While Dumbledore fails to survive the Battle of Hogwarts in the seventh story, a loss grieved heavily by each and every reader across the globe, he still visits thirty-nine year old Harry through paintings on the walls (as per usual in the wizarding world). In one particular moment of defeat in *Cursed Child*, Dumbledore visits Harry to do what he does best - bestow upon him words of wisdom. His advice is as follows:

DUMBLEDORE: In every shining moment of happiness is that drop of poison: the knowledge that pain will come again. Be honest to those you love, show them your pain. To suffer is as human as to breathe. (Thorne/Tiffany 254)

This guidance parallels the two most fundamental notions of the Buddhist tradition. He begins his dialogue with an undertone of impermanence, that each moment of light will come to an end and darkness can, and often will, eventually follow. The last line is a direct parallel to the distinct definition of the first Noble Truth, all life entails suffering. Dumbledore, being the most powerful wizard in the *Potter* universe, is depicted to convey such knowledge, enlightening the minds and decisions of his pupils. Some may argue Dumbledore represents ‘the Buddha’ of the wizarding world, and carries with him a similar insight and leadership.

Almost twenty years after the release of these iconic stories Rowling disclosed a piece of hidden information in reference to the origin of Nagini, a particular shape-shifting serpent who slithered on the side of dark magic. Rowling revealed the name derives from the root ‘Naga’, a snake-like mythical creature customarily found in Asian mythology. Furthermore, the full name *Nagini* is sanskrit for a female naga. An ancient Tibetan myth chronicles a Nagini, who happened to be a serpent goddess and mother of a Buddhist warrior. The intentionality of this particular connection to Buddhism set groundwork in place for ultimate themes within the series. One, then, finds no surprise in Dumbledore’s final exchange with Harry in *Cursed Child* and its significance.

## **Authenticity**

When asked about Buddhism informing his work, our old friend and devoted Buddhist Duncan Sheik replied, "Buddhism deals with all aspects of the human condition,"... "We're always shuttling through different states of life." (for instance from love to pain, or anger to shame; or in the case of *Spring*, angst to repression to loss). He believes *Spring Awakening*

successfully hits those states along that journey, as he strives to thread aching and preservation in all mediums into this work. “For me, the art that inspires me really does that, it shows the human condition in its totality.” (Sheik)

I have to agree.

As I began my analysis, I outlined my personal definition of an authentic work reflecting the human condition, ranging in emotional depth, and including - but not limited to - some external success and recognition. It is presented through any or all aspects of a piece, whether that be composition, dialogue, technicality, or character development. Based upon my beliefs, I have no doubt Sheik would strongly align with this method of thought (I think we’d make quite a mindful team with our strengths in music and chanting...but I digress).

*A Chorus Line* is the pinnacle of human expression, as audiences witness each individual’s experience unfolds throughout the duration of the production. Zach requests honesty and sincerity from the seventeen performers and receives just that. Since its creation was based upon true stories of real performers, this was no accident. Brian Yorkey of *If/Then* once claimed that “the metaphysical can be a little tricky”, however undertones of interdependence and duality clearly shone through Elizabeth’s dichotomous journey. *Flower Drum Song*’s naturalistic tones and underlying struggle with ‘self’ prove for an authentic performance. And while *Avenue Q* and *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* may seem a bit inauthentic to some, simply produced for the sole purpose of entertainment for those who enjoy the fantasy of puppets and wizardry, in reality (no Buddhist pun intended) the dialogue of Princeton and Albus Dumbledore illustrate the fundamental Buddhist theme of impermanence.

As for outward success - *Spring Awakening* holds eight Tony Awards and has been revived once on Broadway. *A Chorus Line* is the second longest running American musical in history, playing at the Shubert Theatre for fifteen years. *Avenue Q* holds three Tony's, including Best Musical in 2004, and continues to welcome patrons internationally. *If/Then*'s cast album debuted number 19 on the Billboard 200, the highest a cast recording has placed since *The Book of Mormon* in 2011. The series of *Harry Potter* is a billion dollar franchise, but *Cursed Child* alone became the highest-grossing play in Broadway history, all while being housed in the largest theatre in the city. And as *Flower Drum Song* cradles its own successes (various international productions and half a dozen Tony nominations), its social impact might serve as its greatest triumph.

*Flower Drum Song*'s musical production presents residents of Chinatown as already assimilated into American culture without the loss of their Asian heritage or tradition. They were seen as true Americans, a part of the melting pot, rather than an outsider/'other' looking in, seen only as a statue on display to represent the 'American dream'. In turn, this representation created new and meaningful work for a multitude of Asian Americans, some of whom had never seen themselves depicted authentically in pieces of art or entertainment. Arguments of *Flower Drum Song* being problematic and flawed have arisen and do hold validity. The majority of the piece was written by two white men, so it is unfortunately no surprise that moments of banter are weighed with insensitivity. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge at the production's particular time and setting following the second world war, social unrest and injustices were present but were also protested. This opportunity became a platform that was quite beneficial, and its admirable artistry continues to flow through generations of musical theatre. *Flower Drum*

*Song*, along with the others, forces audiences to turn inward and reflect on their own human experience, as well as the ones of others. It is productions such as these, the ones that resonate in moments of struggle (or glee), that are deemed authentic.

## **Conclusion**

I am currently writing to you in the year 2020, an unprecedented moment in time (or glitch in the Matrix) that has turned the world on its head. Being seven months into the coronavirus pandemic, quarantine and isolation have become a new normal. All live theatre has been paused indefinitely, creating a world of uneasiness and instability among artists everywhere. And the political climate does not aid in this endeavor. A divisiveness unlike any other consumes our communities and continues to inhibit a proper response to the entertainment industry's indeterminate intermission. The current administration's mismanagement has derailed the operations of American musical theatre as an entity, as well as the safety of artists. Broadway in itself is a billion dollar industry, contributing immensely to the prosperity of the city of New York. This includes non-artists in addition to those employed in entertainment. Broadway is truly 'King of New York' - a *Newsies* reference I am sure my fellow musical theatre folks understood.

Given this anxious new reality, we are told to adopt a kind of mindfulness or meditative mindset to withstand each day and preserve our wellbeing. This very attitude is rooted in Buddhist practice, and the daily struggle and uncertainty undoubtedly mirrors the Four Noble Truths and impermanence. And though some may not see it now, this could be a gift. Artists, creators, and everyone in between - we have been given something invaluable and rare, especially in the lives that we lead: time. We have time to work, reflect, and be. We have been

given the space to revisit something old or create something entirely new. Regardless of what you may choose to fill this time, it is coming from your own individual human experience, based upon your own individual humanness.

I believe in the power of the dharma musical so strongly, and encourage composers and creators to consider the same. With a piece that explores the teachings of the Buddha in any capacity, the audience receives the most human performances, as Buddhism accentuates a wholesome way of life to escape eternal suffering and progress toward a kind of liberation. Expressing the human condition in any regard is challenging, especially through the art of musical theatre. And while I am not asking you to convert to Buddhism or join one of Duncan Sheik's chanting circles (unless you feel so inclined), I will ask that you adopt one particular Buddhist undertone as you walk away from this text: pratitya samutpada, or interdependence. We are connected by our humanness. I feel 'dharma musicals' exemplify this universality, and it is with these elements we can not only entertain the world, but change it for the better.

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## APPENDIX A

### PAUL MONOLOGUE (*A Chorus Line*, 1975)

PAUL: No. Ah ... Okay. From seeing all those movie musicals, I used to dance around on the street, and I'd get caught all the time. God, it was embarrassing. I was always being Cyd Charisse... Always. Which I don't really understand, because I always wanted to be an actor. I mean, I really wanted to perform. Once my cousin said to me, "You'll never be an actor" and I knew she was telling me this because I was such a sissy. I mean, I was terribly effeminate. I always knew I was gay, but that didn't bother me. What bothered me was that I didn't know how to be a boy.

One day I looked at myself in the mirror and said, "You're fourteen years old and you're a faggot. What are you going to do with your life?" By that time I was in Cardinal Hayes High School. There were three thousand boys there. I had no protection any more. No homeroom where I could be charming and funny with the tough guys so they'd fight my battles for me. Like when I went to small schools. I liked school. But my grades got so bad. Even if I knew the answers to questions, I wouldn't raise my hand because I would be afraid they would laugh at me. They'd even whistle at me in the halls. It was awful ... just awful. Finally, I went down to the Principal's office and said : "I'm a homosexual." Well, it was a Catholic high school at around nineteen sixty-two and at the age of fifteen you just didn't say that. He said: "Would you like to see a psychologist?" And I did. And he said: "I think you're very well-adjusted for your age and I think you should quit school." So, I did. But I didn't really want to. I couldn't take it anymore.

See, when I quit school, what I was doing was trying to find out who I was and how to be a man. You know, there are a lot of people in this world who don't know how to be men. And since then, I found out that I am one. I was looking for the wrong thing. I was trying to learn how to be butch. Anyway, I started hanging around Seventy-Second Street, meeting all these really strange people. Just trying to make friends that were like me. So that I'd understand what it was that I was.

Somebody told me they were looking for male dancers for the Jewel Box Revue, you know, the drag show. So, I go down to audition. Now, from all those years of pretending I was Cyd Charisse, I had this fabulous extension. I mean I could turn ... anything my first audition. And they said to me : "You're too short to be a boy, would you like to be a pony?"; And I said : "What's that?"; And they said : "A girl."; "What do I have to do?"; "Show us your legs." So I went and they hiked up my dungarees and they put on a pair of nylon stockings and high heels. It was freaky. It was incredible. And then they brought me back downstairs and they said: "Oh, you have wonderful legs." I said:"Really?...Terrific..."

It's so strange thinking about this. It was a whole lifetime ago. I was just past sixteen. Anyway, then there was this thing of me trying to hide it from my parents. That was something. 'Cause I had to buy all this stuff. Like, ah, shoes to rehearse in, earrings, make-up. And I would hide it all

and my mother would find it. I told her there was this girl in the show and she didn't want her mother to know what she was doing and I was holding this stuff for her. She believed me.

Well, I was finally in show business. It was the asshole of show business - but it was a job... Nothing to brag about. I had friends. But after a while it was so demeaning. Nobody at the Jewel Box had any dignity and most of them were ashamed of themselves and considered themselves freaks. I don't know, I think it was the lack of dignity that got to me, so I left. Oh, I muddled around for a while. I worked as an office boy, a waiter - But without an education, you can't get a good job. So, when the Jewel Box called and asked if I'd come back, I went.

We were working the Apollo Theatre on a Hundred and Twenty-Fifth Street. Doing four shows a day with a movie. It was really tacky. The show was going to go to Chicago. My parents wanted to say goodbye and they were going to bring my luggage to the theatre after the show. Well, we were doing this oriental number and I looked like Anna May Wong. I had these two great big chrysanthemums on either side my head and a huge headdress with gold balls hanging all over it. I was going on for the finale and going down the stairs and who should I see standing by the stage door ... my parents. They got there too early. I freaked. I didn't know what to do. I thought to myself : "I know, I'll just walk quickly past them like all the others and they'll never recognize me." So I took a deep breath and started down the stairs and just as I passed my mother I heard her say : "Oh, my God." Well... I died. But what could I do? I had to go on for the finale so I just kept going. After the show I went back to my dressing room and after I'd finished dressing and taking my makeup off, I went back down stairs. And there they were standing in the middle of all these ... And all they said to me was please write, make sure you eat and take care of yourself. And just before my parents left, my father turned to the producer and said : "Take care of my son..."; That was the first time he ever called me that... I... ah... I... ah....

<< breaks down >>

**APPENDIX B**THE MIRRORS FROM *A CHORUS LINE*'S SCENIC DESIGN (*ORIGINAL PRODUCTION*)

Final performance of the original Broadway run at the Shubert Theatre



Donna McKechnie dancing Cassie's iconic solo, *Music and The Mirror*



**APPENDIX C****THE MIRRORED WALL FROM *IF/THEN*'S SCENIC DESIGN (ORIGINAL PRODUCTION)**

Idina Menzel and Anthony Rapp

