

Chris Morgan
COM 5020
Professor Byars

The Simpsons and the Musical

By its nature, the musical has to be considered a niche genre. That is to say, it is highly unlikely for somebody to go see a musical unless they are a fan of the genre. This is most likely due to the fact that when people think of the musical, they think of integrated musicals, in which characters break into song and dance in the midst of the movie without heed or logic to it, and it can be very disorienting to many filmgoers. Additionally, these films cast aside narrative structure in favor of frills and pomp and elaborate song and dance numbers, which causes the genre to be derided by some. This leaves musicals for the most part on the margins of popular culture.

However, if there is one show that is an universal pop culture experience, it is The Simpsons having been on the air since 1989, it is one of the most successful and popular shows of all time. It is firmly engrained within our culture, not just in the world of entertainment, but spanning into almost all segments of life. Why this is prevalent on the topic of musicals is that The Simpsons has often references musicals within the show, including several episodes that serve as parodies of more well known Hollywood musicals. There is even an episode entitled “All Singing, All Dancing” which provides commentary on the nature of the musical itself and its place in popular culture. While The Simpsons has taken its shots at musicals from time to time, it has helped keep them in the collective conscious of society, even amongst those who are not fans of the genre, and an argument can be made that despite occasional satire of the genre, the show and its creators are certainly not anti-musical.

One of the trademarks of The Simpsons, though it has been lost in recent years, is a sharp, satirical edge to its comedy. The show has had no qualms about skewering and or parodying aspects of society and popular culture, often to make a point about it, but just as often simply because the object of the satire is ripe comedic fodder. Even if you are a fan of the musical, you will likely relent to the fact the genre leaves itself open to parody. After all, most musicals are known for their utopian plots, in which true love is found easily, and everything works out in the end. This is, of course, not the way it works in real life most of the time. The purpose of the musical genre is to entertain and amuse, which makes a utopian story perfectly palatable, but to some viewers, it would be considered cheesy and ridiculous. As such, leave it to a show such as The Simpsons to put a different spin on the musical, by having episodes that parody famous musicals and turning their utopian nature on its head.

There are four episodes of the show that can be considered direct parodies of popular musicals, right down to the tunes for the songs and story arcs. “Yokel Chords” is a parody of The Sound of Music, in which the children of Cletus Spuckler, a “slack jawed yokel” are tutored by Lisa Simpson. Lisa tries to expose them to the world, as they have been rather sheltered and left uncultured, but the children end up as television stars being marginalized as hillbilly stereotypes on Krusty the Klown’s television show. This episode does not provide a great deal of opportunity to compare the plot and the themes to the actual movie, and additionally the “B” story of this episode is rather large itself, dividing the episode into nearly equal parts and limiting the song parodies and plot parodies.

“The President Wore Pearls” is a parody of Evita with Lisa in the role of Eva Peron. Other than a vaguely similar plot and the song “Don’t Cry for me Kids of

Springfield” in lieu of the famous “Don’t Cry for Me Argentina” the episode does not provide that much direct parody, at least not in terms of songs and plot structure. The episode involves Lisa rise to School President, the requisite makeover to mirror her appearance to Eva Peron’s to drive home the parody, and her eventual ousting from power and exile to a different school. There are no juxtaposing themes here, and the episode does not feel like a reflection upon the musical itself as much as it feels like a lifted plot for the sake of doing a musical episode.

A better example is the episode “My Fair Laddy” which is a much more in depth and direct parody of My Fair Lady in this episode Groundskeeper Willy, a brutish man with a thick Scottish accent making him the perfect substitute for Eliza Doolittle, is transformed by Lisa into an articulate, well mannered gentleman. However, things do not go nearly as well for him as they did for Eliza, as he gets a job as a maitre d’ only to find that he has to deal with boorish louts like Krusty the Klown even in this life of high society. He eventually starts to yearn for his old life, when he could be drunk, brash, and violent, and he does eventually return to his old self and his old shack. This is partly due to the fact the show usually returns things back to the way they were at the end of an episode, but also to provide the message that it is hard to be something your not. The episode isn’t particularly hard on the message of My Fair Lady, and uses it more as a jumping off point for a plot.

However, the very first musical parody episode, “Simpsoncalifragilisticexpiala(Annoyed Grunt)cious,” the “annoyed grunt” in question being the script version of Homer Simpson’s famous “D’oh” exclamation, is a direct parody of Mary Poppins. It takes the Simpson family and sticks them in the roles of the

original movie, and comes complete with song parodies as well. In the film Mary Poppins a family in disarray hires the titular nanny, an independent, magical woman, to take care of the kids. The entire family, including the uptight father, learns a great deal from her and in the end they are all united, having changed completely, as they fly a kite happily ever after. It is your typical utopian musical, made even more utopian than most due to the presence of a magic woman, right down to the ending where everything is right and perfect in the world.

The Simpsons retelling of the tale has quite a different arc to it, however. Even with the presence of a magic woman, it could hardly be considered utopian, and is in fact grounded in reality, or as grounded in reality as it can be. The stresses of raising three children and dealing with her oafish husband have given Marge a great deal of stress, to the point that her hair is falling out at an alarming rate. Determined to make things easier for her, the family decides to hire a nanny. This brings us to the first song parody from Mary Poppins, and the first inclination that this is a parody of that film. The kids sing a song they have written as an advertisement for what the nanny should be, a parody of “The Perfect Nanny” from the film, but in Simpsons fashion, the overly sweet nature of the song is done away with. Bart adds to the song his phrase of “eat my shorts” to, in his words “cut through the treacle” a direct reference to the sappiness of the original song, and the version within the show up to that point. Homer later adds that he wants “no fat chicks” and a nanny who will “work for minimum wage” to his idea of a perfect nanny. The Simpsons version of the song thus satirizes the original version for its over the top sweetness, providing extra laughs at the expense of the film to the laughs from the actual song.

Eventually, a woman named Sherry Bobbins, in an overly obvious parody of the name Mary Poppins, shows up to be the nanny, even flying in on an umbrella just as Mary does in the film. She is given the job, and goes to work. However, though calling herself “practically perfect in every way” just as Mary does in the film, Sherry’s version of practically perfect has lowers standards, as we come to find out. However, this is in line with the more realistic tone of the episode, and it’s continued lambasting of the utopian nature of Mary Poppins. The Simpson children have a huge mess to clean up, but of course, they don’t want to do it. In the film, Mary sings about how “a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down” and teaches the kids to have fun while doing boring chores. Sherry Bobbins, however, teaches the kids the following lesson, “If there is a task that must be done, don’t turn your tail and run. Don’t pout, don’t sob, just do a half-assed job.” Thus begins a song about how if you cut every corner you’ll have no time to play, even proclaiming it to be the “American way.” Obviously, this is the exact opposite message of the film, and an all around bad message in general. However, that is where the comedy comes from, the juxtaposition of Mary Poppin’s message to Sherry Bobbin’s message, a message which to the viewer probably rings more true as well.

After believing she has taught the family better manners and turned their lives around, which is what Mary Poppins did in the film, she decides to leave, however, before she gets a chance to go, Homer shoves Bart through the window while strangling him, and she re-enters the house to find it already an utter mess and Marge cowering in the corner with her hair falling out. As such, she decides to stay and help some more. However, it is to no avail. The family has fallen back into their old habits. Sherry tries to turn their lives around, but continually fails to do so, and is met with derision. She tries to

get Homer to get his own beer with a song, but she is shot down by Homer and Bart. She tries to get Lisa to get some exercise instead of sitting in front of the television, but she refuses to. Bart, meanwhile, inexplicably throws cupcakes against the wall making a huge mess for no reason other than for the sake of it. Sherry is left in utter shambles. We next find her drunkenly singing Jimmy Buffet's "Margaritaville" with local drunk Barney Gumble, a broken woman.

This is the opposite of the utopian musical. In fact, it is even a tad bit dystopian. A well meaning woman has tried to help a family out, and she is in turn destroyed. However, the episode does not end there, and the message of the episode is arrived upon shortly thereafter. Marge thanks Sherry for doing the best job she could, but she can't change the family and nobody can. The Simpsons then sing a song about how they are "happy just the way they are" in which though they lament their travails, Lisa singing "she's getting used to never getting noticed" and Bart adding he's "stuck here 'til I can steal a car" the message is that they are still happy in life, and they don't need to be changed.

In reality, people don't change unless they want to. The notion of a strange woman showing up and changing an entire family for the better in a short while is utopian, and also impractical and ridiculous. The people behind The Simpsons realized this and wanted to comment on it, thus bringing us this episode. In one last moment of indignation for the film Mary Poppins, Sherry Bobbins is sucked into the engine of an airplane as she flies away. The episode clearly serves as a fairly pointed satire at the message of the film Mary Poppins and the impossibility of it. So in turn, The Simpsons

provided a parody of the episode with a slightly more reasonable message, thus not only providing laughs and satire, but making a point as well.

Considering their hatchet job they did to the classic musical Mary Poppins, one might presume that the people behind The Simpsons hate the musical. However, that is likely not true. It is tricky to throw a blanket over the show and how it feels about musicals, because several different people have been in charge of the show over its run, and there have been dozens of writers who have plied their trade on the show. However, one constant throughout the history of the show has been musical numbers, particularly musical numbers that are parodies of songs from musical films. You can find many of these numbers in the episode “All Singing, All Dancing” from season nine. However, this episode also serves as the best estimator of how the show feels about the musical in general.

The episode begins with Homer and Bart returning from the video store with Paint Your Wagon starring Clint Eastwood and Lee Marvin, expecting a violent, bloody western. However, when they find out it is a musical, Homer is horrified. Homer then claims “singing is the lowest form of communication” before the episode breaks out into a musical itself. Homer, then singing, proclaims musicals as “fake and phony and totally wrong” before being told he is singing a song himself, as we the viewer are then launched into clips of Homer singing from throughout the show.

Appropriately enough, the episode pits the males of the family as being against the musical, and the females being for it. It would certainly be reasonable to proclaim the musical, for the most part, to be a “feminine” genre. Most men are not interested in garish costumes and dance numbers, and the plots of musicals are often about men and women

finding love, all things often preferred by the female gender. However, the episode also points out the fact that action films are ostensibly the male version of the musical. Both are fairly light on plot and heavy on spectacle, and generally utopian, with the utopian story arc of the action film resulting in the hero saving the day and killing the bad guy. Both genres certainly have their detractors, but they both serve their purpose for their respective audience, though those audiences differ greatly.

The episode proceeds to go through many moments of The Simpsons that are mostly integrated song pieces. Although, to be fair, they are not integrated in the sense people inexplicably burst into song and dance in the middle of normal everyday living without those around them being taken aback. Songs in The Simpsons are often people singing within the parameters of the show. While they are not generally times that call for singing, the fact that the person is singing a song within the world of the show is almost always recognized, and it would seem the writers of the show don't want to take that dive into the bizarre and illogical world of the fully integrated song, preferring to instead keep a semblance of reality within the moments.

In the end of the episode, Homer finally relents, saying there are "more terrible things, than musical comedies where everyone sings" before the show breaks the fourth wall proclaiming that one such worse thing is when a "long running series does a cheesy clip show." The show, having on the occasion poked fun at the musical for being kind of silly, saves the sharpest criticism for itself. Additionally, one could see Homer's opinion as perhaps the opinion of the people behind the show themselves, or perhaps as an avatar for a stubborn viewer at home. Yes, musicals are rather artificial and silly, but there are certainly worse things, and they certainly can have their moments. A funny song is still

humorous even if it is a song. Comedy is often itself rather silly, even if it is more realistic than people breaking into song and dance. However, what The Simpsons used to pride itself on, and what would make its view of entertainment not mesh with that of the musical, was a connection to reality. The show did not want to be silly, it wanted to be smart and poignant and make people laugh but also provide social commentary while it was at it. The Mary Poppins parody is such an example. However, despite that, one cannot deny the merits of the musical as entertainment, and innocuous entertainment at that. Nobody can rationally rail virulently about the film musical, since there is nothing particularly offensive about it. You can almost see the episode “All Singing, All Dancing” as a rebuttal to the Mary Poppins parody. Yes, musicals are “fake” and “phony” but there are worse things, and what is more important is keeping your own product up to your standards rather than worrying about what other forms of entertainment are doing.

It would appear clear the show does not have a “problem” so to speak with the musical, and they clearly are well versed on them as well. Otherwise, they couldn’t have done four episodes that are direct parodies of musicals, in addition to the countless other songs they have parodied over the years. The musical is not the only genre The Simpsons has parodied as well, as they have lampooned pretty much everything under the Sun. That is part of what makes it such a universal show, and what makes it beloved by so many. It’s touched on so many different subjects and topics and genres, everybody can relate to it. If you don’t like musicals, you can still laugh at a musical number in the show, whether you are familiar with its source or not and perhaps even take glee in the show for parodying the musical. Conversely, if you are a fan of the musical you can appreciate the

reference and also perhaps except them poking a little fun at the genre, as somebody would be hard pressed to take the genre seriously.

This brings up the question of what does The Simpsons do for the musical genre? It does poke fun at it sometimes, but all in all, it would be hard to argue that it doesn't have a positive impact on it. As stated previously, the musical is very much a niche genre, and as such people often aren't exposed to it. It is hard to get a niche genre noticed and in the mainstream. However, it could be argued no show is more mainstream than The Simpsons. As such, by mentioning musicals, even in parody, it gets them out to an audience that wouldn't hear of them otherwise. It doesn't take any stretch of the imagination to presume that there are people who have seen the episodes parodying My Fair Lady and Mary Poppins that have never seen either film. However, now they are aware of such films without have seen them. Additionally, if they enjoy the episodes, they may then be cajoled into seeing the movies themselves. At the very least, The Simpsons archives moments from musicals, albeit in parody often, for future generations in a place much more visible than the genre itself is. The show has done a great deal to keep the genre relevant in popular culture, and as such even with the parodies, it has had a positive effect on the musical genre.

The Simpsons is a historical landmark of television and quite frankly culture in general. It is the longest running sitcom of all time, and continues on in its twentieth season currently. It shares a love/hate relationship with several genres of Hollywood, but none is more prevalent than the musical. The show loves to make parodies of songs from musicals, and even parody entire musicals in episodes from time to time. No musical parody episode is probably more memorable or beloved than the parody of Mary

Poppins. This is partially due to the fact that it really satirizes the movie and its utopian nature, but also presumably because it is so in depth in its parody. Nobody can argue that musicals are generally utopian and thus a bit silly and definitely far-fetched, even ardent fans of the genre. As such, even fans of the genre can laugh when watching the episode, as long as they are willing to admit that the conclusion of Mary Poppins is highly unlikely. Despite such parody episodes, it would seem that the people behind the show don't truly dislike musicals, and in fact perhaps even like them a bit. They just realize that their nature is incredibly easy to lampoon, and is an easy medium for comedy. However, they would have to be at least fairly knowledgeable about the genre in order to produce such parodies, so clearly they cannot truly hate it. All these parodies may seem like they marginalize the genre, but that would not appear to be the case. It helps keep a genre that could easily be forgotten except to those who are already fans in the conscious of popular culture. The musical genre is a bit of a niche. The Simpsons is an institution. One would think they don't have much in common. However, The Simpsons has had a longstanding relationship with the musical that has benefited both parties immensely.

Author: Chris Morgan, Wayne State University, December 2008