4

DRESSED BY PARIS

Mlle. Modiste, *Roberta* and *No Strings*

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'I've got *quelque chose*' Paris fashion and the Broadway musical

In *Paris*, Cole Porter's, 1928 musical comedy *billet doux* to his adopted city, a scandalous Parisian actress named Vivienne Rolland discovers the most persuasive way to sway her prospective mother-in-law's heart: through her closet. Determined to overcome the staunch disapproval of Mrs. Cora Sabbot, a New England Puritan, Vivienne (played originally by Irene Bordoni) compels Cora towards couture. At first, Cora protests: 'The Sabbots never wear anything but navy black and blue!' (Brown et al., 1928, pp. 1–8). Yet, before long, Cora has been transformed by the alluring Vivienne, who has that '*quelque chose*/That brings me beaux' (as Bordoni would have sung in an unused song for *Paris* [Porter, 1928]). Ditching her 'Whistler's Mother'-like apparel, the Massachusetts matriarch undergoes a dramatic makeover, trading a scarlet-accented chiffon and lace frock for an 'exceedingly daring and smart' gold evening gown ('Act Three description'). Emboldened by her new wardrobe, Cora sips cocktails at the Ritz, flirts with beaux and relishes her newfound glamour, exclaiming: 'Oh, to hell with the Sabbots!' (Brown et al., 1928, pp. 1–8).

While the spectacle-oriented theatrical genre bears little surface resemblance to the prim Mrs. Sabbot, the Broadway musical has similarly expressed a longing to be 'dressed by Paris'. In a long parade of shows extending from late-19th century operetta and revue, to the Paris-set musicals of Cole Porter and to mid-century shows and films like *Funny Face* (1957) and *Coco* (1969), the Broadway musical has sought to drape its manifold mythologising of American democracy with the irresistible 'quelque chose' of Paris fashion, embodied in the elegant feminine icon of the *Parisienne*. In the Broadway musical, settings of Paris fashion have served both as mirrors and measurements for the American character: allowing creators of Broadway musicals to both project elaborate materialist fairy tales and to chart the ideological distance from Cora Sabbot's Plymouth Rock to the 20th century's

aspirations towards cosmopolitan modernity. Many Broadway musicals closely link settings of Parisian fashion with discourses of sophistication: an ethos most dominant in the interwar era, but influential throughout the 20th century. 'If there was ever an Age of Sophistication, it was surely the 1920s and 1930s', as Faye Hammill observes in describing the era's various conceptions of sophistication as urbanity, sleek modernity in fashion, 'world-weary' irony and sexual open-mindedness (2010, pp. 113–120) as well as its basis in 'transatlantic cultural exchange' (2010, p. 163).

In the three 20th-century Broadway musicals discussed in this essay, the operetta *Mlle. Modiste* (1905), the musical comedy *Roberta* (1933) and the musical play *No Strings* (1962), settings of Paris fashion have inspired elaborate glamour and spectacle. At the same time, these musicals reflect sharply upon American national and cultural identity, using images of Parisian couture to explore contradictory ideas about democracy and aristocracy; pragmatism and aesthetic style; Puritanism and sensual expression; and 'European' and 'American' worldviews. Populated with the models, shop-girls and modistes that Agnès Rocamora describes as aspects of the *Parisienne* (2009, p. 25), all three musicals use Paris fashion to examine questions of gender and sexuality and constructs of femininity and masculinity.

Mlle. Modiste, Roberta and *No Strings* all employ Parisian fashion settings to variously explore the meanings of sophistication and its translation to American cultural mores. Set in a millinery on the Rue de la Paix, *Mlle. Modiste* (music by Victor Herbert; book and lyrics by Henry Blossom) defines Parisian sophistication as a luxurious accessory to the more essential asset of American democracy, epitomised in the enterprising shop-girl heroine of the title. Unfolding in the boulevard dress shop of a courtesan-turned-couturier, *Roberta* (music by Jerome Kern; book and lyrics by Otto Harbach) models sophistication via a more expansive and fluid concept of American gender roles as a virile college fullback transforms into a chic *modiste* and 'dressmaker'. Centred in Paris' modelling industry and spanning locations in Monte Carlo and the French Riviera, *No Strings* (music and lyrics by Richard Rodgers; book by Samuel Taylor) aligns ideals of sophistication with not only the city's sartorial elegance but with France's traditions of racial tolerance – as contrasted with American bigotry – and its history of expatriate freedom. Written as a starring vehicle for Diahann Carroll, the Civil Rights-era musical recounted the interracial romance between two expatriates: an African American model from Harlem and a white novelist from Maine. Framing Paris, and its fashion industry, as a site of liberation and self-determination for African American women, *No Strings* substantially expanded the vision of fashion as democratising agent evoked in *Mlle. Modiste*, while pointing to racial dynamics left unexplored in the 1905 musical fairy tale.

'She ought to be an American': grisettes, the 'square deal' and Mlle. Modiste

Opening at the Knickerbocker Theatre on December 25, 1905, Herbert and Blossom's *Mlle. Modiste* drew upon an atmosphere of Parisian elegance as set in a millinery on the Rue de la Paix. On this fashionable boulevard in 1858, couturier Charles Frederick Worth had opened his historic high-fashion salon, catering to

aristocrats of France's Second Empire and *belle époque* eras. In its plot of an industrious and clever shop girl who dreams both of becoming an opera star and marrying the Viscount Etienne de Bouvray, *Mlle. Modiste* also drew upon the close proximity of the Rue de la Paix to the Paris Opera House: another cultural magnet for the city's elite. A comic operetta, *Mlle. Modiste* drew rave reviews for the star performance of Fritzi Scheff, its production 'trimmed with rare taste and skill' (Hubbard, 1906), and its skilful integration of music and narrative.

At the same time that *Mlle. Modiste* evoked elite Parisian luxury, Herbert and Blossom stitched their adaptation of Charles Perrault's *Cinderella* with American themes and values. 'From beginning to end, *Mlle. Modiste* scintillates with brightest wit. Its humor is thoroughly American, but somehow suits well the Parisian setting', observed *Town and Country* (Anon, 1905b). In their retelling, Herbert and Blossom placed the *Parisienne* figure of the *grisette* into conversation with the more familiar American archetype of the shop girl who worked as a labourer in the fashion industry and first appeared in British Cinderella musicals like *The Girl Behind the Counter* (1906), many produced at George Edwardes' Gaiety Theatre. Like the shop girl, the *grisette* pervaded French cultural discourse as a 'worker in the Parisian fashion trade', though she drew upon a distinctively Gallic context. Jules Janin's definition of the *grisette* as a versatile working 'girl who is good at everything' (quoted in Rocamora, 2009, p. 94) aptly characterises the artful Fifi, whom Madame Cecile (the exploitative, wicked stepmother-like owner of the millinery) concedes is 'pretty and chic and a clever saleswoman' (Blossom and Herbert, 1905, pp. 1–11). While drawing upon the glamorous Parisian proximity of the *grisette* to 'fashion's latest pose' (Blossom and Herbert, 1905, pp. 1–1), *Mlle. Modiste* also foregrounded her identity as a worker and a symbol of American democratic values.

Though set in the world of Paris consumer fashion, *Mlle. Modiste* epitomised the values of President Theodore Roosevelt's 'Square Deal'. Roosevelt promoted this Progressive-era domestic policy throughout his two-term presidency from 1901 to 1909. In 1902, Roosevelt promised 'a square deal for every man, big or small, rich or poor' (Lewis, 1906, p. 74). In 1906 (the year following *Mlle. Modiste*'s opening), Roosevelt published his book, *A Square Deal*, outlining his vision of equal opportunities for all Americans: an egalitarianism contradicted by his imperialist policies in Latin America and the Caribbean. Roosevelt's promise of a 'Square Deal for the Negro' (Roosevelt, 1906) also fared weakly against the realities of Jim Crow violence and voter suppression raging in the South and the persistence of racial segregation throughout the country. At the same time, Roosevelt instituted numerous social and economic reforms and made efforts to reign in corporate power while expanding consumer protections (the 'Square Deal'). These measures appealed powerfully to American myths of a meritocratic distribution of wealth and opportunity.

The president's visit on 9 October 1905 to *Mlle. Modiste* during its out-of-town try-out at the Columbia Theatre in Washington, DC, underscores the musical's political contexts. *The New York Times* observed:

> The audience rose and cheered repeatedly when the President came in. He was in jovial humor and laughed heartily, led the applause, started all the

encores, headed the demand for curtain calls, and was the first to ask Mr. Herbert for a speech.

The *Times* also reported Roosevelt laughing at an allusion to his Long Island summer home:

> In one song by Bertha Holley (as Mrs. Bent), entitled 'Our Culture Club in Keokuk', occurred the lines: 'We've argued politics and such/We don't think Kaiser Bill so much/We even send advice to Oyster Bay'. The President enjoyed this so much that the audience compelled several repetitions of the verse just to see him laugh.
>
> *('President Has Good Laugh', 1905a)*

Mlle. Modiste succeeded with Roosevelt-era American audiences by blending the sophistication of Paris fashion with Square Deal values, both represented in the heroine of the title. As Fifi, Viennese-born leading lady Fritzi Scheff drew praise from *The Syracuse Herald*: 'Hers is the elusive and piquant charm that is generally attributed to the Parisienne. . . . Fritzi Scheff has this innate knowledge of how to dress and what to wear' ('Fritzi Scheff's Career', 1908). *The New York Tribune* also noted the modish millinery fashions displayed in the show and in numbers like 'Hats Make the Woman' ('Notes on the Stage', 1906).

At the same time that *Mlle. Modiste* marketed Paris fashion, the musical balanced its consumerist spectacle with attentiveness to themes of feminised labour. Rocamora writes of Paris's image as a world 'fashion city', opposing

> two versions of Paris fashion and of Paris more generally – one spectacular, polished to attract consumers, the other unencumbered by the imperative to impress the consuming gaze, a Paris of sweatshops, workshops and unglamorized trade – (conjuring) up Erving Goffman's notions of front and back regions.
>
> *(2009, p. 49)*

Mlle. Modiste's opening number, 'Furs and Feathers', featured a chorus of shop girls singing about 'Hard work! Very little pay' and the 'distress' of working 'ten hours every day'. As if realising their status as characters in an operetta, the shop workers suddenly switch to Goffman's 'front region' of a performative surface. They chirp, 'Yet we're as happy as can be!' (Blossom and Herbert, 1905, pp. 1–1) and sing about their anticipation of the evening's romance.

Mlle. Modiste framed its heroine as an industrious *grisette* consonant with American values and Roosevelt's own 'conservative progressivism' (Riccards, 1995, p. 57). Fifi represents the enterprise and ambition of the Protestant work ethic and opposes the snobbery associated with the aristocratic Rue de la Paix. The musical mixed the Cinderella narrative with the Horatio Alger rags-to-riches story, as Blossom and Herbert provide Fifi with a fairy godfather in the form of American

FIGURE 4.1 A Parisian shopgirl with American values: Fritzi Scheff as the eponymous character in *Mlle Modiste* (1905).

Source: Postcard provided by the editor.

millionaire Hiram Bent, who passes onto Fifi a gospel of pluck-and-luck. He endows her with a loan to go out and pursue her dreams, both of becoming an opera singer and marrying Etienne. Impressed by Fifi's fairness with customers, Hiram praises the shopgirl's honesty and industry in what he considers the highest terms. When asked if she's American, he responds, 'She ought to be. I found her in a shop' (Blossom and Herbert, 1905, pp. 2–15).

The musical's denouement illustrated its *Mlle. Modiste* achieving her own 'Square Deal'. She triumphs over the condescension of the Count de Bouvray, who had forbidden the 'pert little minx' (Blossom and Herbert, 1905, pp. 2–1–7) and saleswoman from marrying his nephew. At the end of the musical, as Fifi demonstrates her new opera fame as Madame Bellini, the Count makes his apologies to Fifi at a charity bazaar. There, he carries out the conditions, explained by Fifi earlier in the musical, for her

that 'you come to me with your hat in your hand and beg me to do so!' (Blossom and Herbert, 1905, pp. 2–1–13). Evoking its heroine's millinery both as a symbol of high fashion and egalitarianism, *Mlle. Modiste* thus tipped its hat to Continental glamour while most vigorously saluting Rooseveltian values and myths.

'Paris has done something for him': fashioning the male 'Parisienne' in Roberta

Like *Mlle. Modiste, Roberta* extols American democratic ideals. One of the hits of the 1933–1934 Broadway season, the New Deal-era musical – described as an 'operetta, revue, and fashion show all rolled into one' (Barron, 1933) – opened at the New Amsterdam Theatre on November 18, 1933, and featured music by Jerome Kern, lyrics and book by Otto Harbach as well as show-stopping gowns by the costume designer Kiviette. Yet, by contrast to the Roosevelt-era patriotism of the former musical, *Roberta* asserted that American character might be beneficially broadened and refined by exposure to French style and sophistication. It also suggested that an appreciation of Paris fashion could lead to a more expressive concept of American masculinity.

Herbert and Blossom's musical had recounted the story of a *modiste*-turned-opera diva. By contrast, *Roberta* followed John Kent (played by Ray Middleton), who transforms from football fullback to male *modiste* after inheriting the 'Roberta's' dress shop of his Aunt Minnie Roberts (Fay Templeton), who reconnects with him in Paris shortly before her death. Spurned by his snobbish college girlfriend, Sophie Teale (Helen Gray), John finds new love with Stephanie (Tamara), the expatriate shop assistant who has secretly been working as Roberta's head designer – and concealing her identity as the daughter of a Russian grand duchess. Like *Mlle. Modiste, Roberta* drew upon the Broadway musical's classic Cinderella narrative. At the same time, *Roberta* presented a witty gender reversal of the trope of the Parisienne: the feminine icon long coded as synonymous with Paris style, who 'sets trends and embodies Parisian distinction' (Rocamora, 2009, p. 90).

Based on Alice Duer Miller's best-selling 1932 novella, the musical adaptation adhered relatively faithfully to the Miller story: an elegant and 'delightfully capricious' soufflé (dust jacket of *Gowns by Roberta*, Miller, 1933). At the same time, the musical expanded Miller's Paris setting – opening the musical's action at a New England fraternity house at Haverhill College – and added screwball roles for star comics Lyda Roberti and Bob Hope (respectively cast as fashion-plate Polish chanteuse Madame Scharwenka and wisecracking collegiate bandleader Huckleberry 'Huck' Haines, a character 'who did not exist in Miller's novel' [Block, 2019, p. 19]). The dust jacket of *Gowns by Roberta* described the light-hearted gender satire and sophisticated ethos of Miller's plot:

> When a man is handsome, six foot two, captain of his college football team, and goes to Paris to forget the girl who jilted him, anything can happen. But to find himself, as John Kent did, in all his masculine virility, co-proprietor of the swankiest dressmaking shop in the Rue Pavane, staggers the imagination. . . . In truly active American fashion, the metamorphosis took place while John learned the ways of the cosmopolitan world.
>
> *(1933)*

Though considered by critics to be less narratively and musically ambitious than Kern's previous musicals *Show Boat* (1927), *The Cat and the Fiddle* (1931) and *Music in the Air* (1932), *Roberta* flourished at the box office on the strength of melodic song hits like 'Smoke Gets in Your Eyes' (performed by Tamara, on guitar) and a spectacular production geared by producer Max Gordon to 'knock (audiences') eyes out' (Gordon, 1963, p. 174).

Produced just after the darkest days of the Great Depression, as the New Deal launched a long process of economic recovery, *Roberta* captured the zeitgeist through its elaborate escapism. The musical offered American audiences the recreated spectacle of Paris *haute couture* at the height of its interwar style and influence. When Minnie/Roberta scoffs at the temperamental Scharwenka, 'Let her go back to Worth or (Jeanne) Lanvin' (Harbach and Kern, 1933, p. 32), Broadway audiences would have placed these designers among a Parisian fashion landscape that included Coco Chanel, Elsa Schiaparelli and Paul Poiret. Among the most prolific and influential designers of interwar musical comedy and revue, the American designer Kiviette, born to

FIGURE 4.2 The original Broadway cast of *Roberta*, a musical set in the alluring world of Paris fashion. From left to right: Ray Middleton (John Kent), Tamara (Princess Stephanie), Fay Templeton (Aunt Minnie, aka Madame Roberta), Bob Hope (Huckleberry Haines) and George Murphy (Billy Boyden).

Source: Photo by George Rinhart, provided by the editor.

a Russian-Jewish Staten Island family as Yetta Schimansky (López-Cydosh, 2018, p. 207), earned raves for her stunning evocations of French couture that, incorporating American synthetic fabrics, influenced the next Paris fashion season.[1] *The Baltimore Sun* asserted, 'Kiviette should have equal billing with the author' (Barron, 1933).

Roberta's setting drew not only on the exceptional 'chic and allure' of Paris fashion but on a number of cultural discourses that dominated American popular culture between the two world wars. Transatlantic narratives of cultural exchange, created by writers like Sinclair Lewis, drew upon the waves of expatriate experiences in 'Lost Generation' Paris. This late 1920s/early 1930s cycle of works typically featured American protagonists seeking after sophistication as they contemplated more leisured lifestyles and culturally expansive values than the materialism and efficiency of American 'Babbitry'.[2] In fact, Max Gordon's quartet of Broadway hits during the 1933–1934 season also included a stage adaptation of Sinclair Lewis' 1929 novel *Dodsworth*, in which the European travels of the Midwestern industrialist title character broaden his perspectives while dooming his marriage. *Roberta's* protagonist, John Kent, resembles a younger version of Sam Dodsworth, whom Lewis describes as a former college football star. While Sam's status-conscious wife, Fran, views him as 'provincial as a prairie dog' (Lewis, 2014, location 2419), *Roberta*'s Sophie Teale similarly compares John to a 'big, affectionate blundering Newfoundland dog' (Harbach and Kern, 1933, p. 24).

Described as an author with a 'carefree intimacy with the sophisticated upper set' (dust jacket of *Gowns by Roberta*, Miller, 1933), Alice Duer Miller's work, and its Broadway musical adaptation, contributed to pervasive interwar discourses of sophistication. Born into a 'blue-blood' American family (Hammond, 1933) descended from a Revolutionary War general, Miller chafed against the Puritan roots with which she characterises John Kent, the son of a Yankee farmer, in *Gowns by Roberta*. A noted feminist and suffragette, Miller created a prolific body of novels, light verse and screenplays and also gained publicity as a member of Manhattan's bastion of performative sophistication, the Algonquin Round Table.

In addition, both *Gowns by Roberta* and the musical *Roberta* drew from the influential discourse of the *Parisienne*. In the 1952 Hollywood musical remake of *Roberta, Lovely to Look At*, Tony Naylor (played by Howard Keel) inscribes the image of Paris as embodied in luxurious femininity: 'Paris is a beautiful woman' (*Lovely to Look At*, 1952). Rocamora elaborates on the multi-faceted aspects of the Parisienne as she has appeared as an 'icon of modernity' (2009, p. 105) in popular culture: as not only the shop girl *grisette* portrayed in *Mlle. Modiste*, but in roles including the fashionable courtesan and the 'universal woman', who might 'equally well be a foreigner' as Paris-born (2009, p. 98). As Rocamora observes, these various personae have drawn from the image of the 'quintessential *Parisienne*' as 'sophisticated, perfectly groomed, elegantly dressed, urban and independent', as well as possessing an 'emancipated sexuality' (2009, p. 105).

Roberta, like its source, the Miller novel, flips the traditional gender of the Parisienne in the metamorphosis of John Kent. The musical portrays John's transformation under the elegant wing of his courtesan-turned-couturier Parisienne aunt,

born as the American Minnie Roberts. 'Minnie in her day was hot stuff!' (Harbach and Kern, 1933, p. 9), Huck Haines breathlessly describes John's aunt, who had been the kept mistress of a French marquis before striking out on her own as Madame Roberta to become 'the greatest dressmaker in Paris' (Harbach and Kern, 1933, p. 9). Vowing to help her favoured nephew, John, thwart Sophie Teale's perception of her ex-fiancé as 'unsophisticated' (Harbach and Kern, 1933, p. 11), Minnie resolves to give him a full makeover. When John confesses that Sophie has broken off their engagement, Minnie pledges that she, with the help of her immaculately tailored English aristocrat friend, Lord Henry Delves, can help John shed his provincialism. By the time Roberta's opens under John's new management, in partnership with Stephanie, Minnie's nephew has been transformed into not only a 'King of Couturiers' (Harbach and Kern, 1933, p. 65), but a masculine reflection of the Parisienne. Sophie expresses her astonishment at John's metamorphosis: 'Paris has done something to him. His clothes, his manner, his hair . . .', while Huck effuses, 'Did you ever see such a change in a man?' (Harbach and Kern, 1933, p. 60).

By contrast, the Old World Russian expatriate Stephanie undergoes a reverse arc in *Roberta*. She acquires the vernacular, New World sophistication of 'the American Language' and increasing fluency with American popular culture. From Huck, she learns to perform risqué numbers like 'Let's Begin' and to pepper her speech with American slang. Through the character of Stephanie – who changes from a 'drab little modiste' (Harbach and Kern, 1933, p. 88) into her mother's imperial ball gown at the end of the show – *Roberta* reflected the cosmopolitanism of the French fashion industry. In interwar Paris, numerous exiles from the Russian Revolution had re-established their names in French couture, among them the Grand Duchess Maria Pavlovna.

John and Stephanie's romance evoked a fusion of American democracy and European aristocracy (by way of a romanticised Tsarist Russia). Similarly, *Roberta*'s score and choreography fused the elegance of Parisian style with the spontaneity of American jazz. As Sarah Berry observes of *Roberta*'s 1934 Hollywood film adaptation,

> This struggle, however, is also about the nature of fashion, as articulated in a contest between American practicality and European aesthetics; this contrast is ultimately mediated by the popular stylishness of American music and dance, represented by Fred Astaire (as Huck) and Ginger Rogers (as Scharwenka).
>
> *(2000, p. 66)*

In the stage musical *Roberta*, Minnie and Stephanie perform songs aligned with the vocabulary of European operetta (e.g. 'Yesterdays'), while American jazz is represented by both the Polish bombshell, Scharwenka and the California Collegiate jazz band headed by Huck. The latter invents the idea of a musical fashion show scored to the band's tunes.

Framing Paris fashion as an aspirational model of sophistication, *Roberta* also espoused increased flexibility in American concepts of gender through its story of a 'stalwart young All-American fullback' (Gabriel, 1933) turned couturier. Like Miller's book, the Kern-Harbach musical dramatises cultural anxieties directed upon the 'virility' of John Kent. In the source novel, Miller critiques American puritanism and rigid ideals of masculinity. John receives a disapproving letter from his mother: 'A man dressmaker! All your friends here agree with me, and I assure you the jokes I hear – and read, for even the papers have taken it up – are far from pleasant' (Miller, 1933, p. 119). As in the Miller book, John faces initial dismay as his new 'feminine' career is satirised in the American press and a profile entitled 'Football Player Goes Modiste' appears in *The New Yorker* (Harbach and Kern, 1933, p. 65). Similarly, when Huck teases John about the likely headlines ('All-star fullback goes in for dressmaking. Swish!'), the latter responds with a homophobic epithet, 'Speak for yourself, Nellie!' (Harbach and Kern, 1933, p. 44). Yet, throughout the course of *Roberta*, John becomes increasingly comfortable with more gender-fluid Parisian notions of masculine sophistication. As Huck tells Sophie, 'Say, he likes being a dressmaker. And why shouldn't he? It seems to be dazzling you once again' (Harbach and Kern, 1933, p. 88).

Roberta premiered at a time in which the Paris fashion industry was dominated by numerous female and male European designers but by few American men. In later decades, American fashion designers, such as Norman Norell and Donald Brooks, acquired influence, and by 1952, when *Roberta*'s second Hollywood musical version premiered (as the heavily adapted *Lovely to Look At*), the shocking novelty of a male American fashion designer appeared outmoded: the character of John Kent was reconceived as Tony Naylor (Howard Keel), a playboy Broadway producer rather than a college football fullback.

No Strings, with costume designs by Brooks, appeared against an American cultural context that created more room for men's sartorial expressivity. During the Civil Rights era, America's fashion industries also made increasing space for African American women, a development which was reflected in media discourses of Paris. In the 1962 musical, Paris continued to be represented as the 'capital of style and sophistication' ('Top Negro Model', 1960), as described by the pioneering African American expatriate model Helen Williams: a likely inspiration for the character of Barbara Woodruff in *No Strings*.

'For once, I was just an American': Civil Rights-era fashion and the universal woman in *No Strings*

Roberta illustrated the cosmopolitan style of the *Parisienne* as a beneficial influence on American masculinity. By contrast, *No Strings* celebrated the city as a beacon of 'Parisian racial sophistication' (Cook, 1962), offering a fashion industry more inclusive and tolerant than its mid-century American counterpart. According to Agnès Rocamora, the icon of the *Parisienne* encompassed an ideal of a 'Universal Woman', one 'impervious to borders':

> 'She is even sometimes born a *Parisienne* on the other side of the ocean.' In 1932, writer Léon-Paul Fargue wrote that '*La Parisienne* can be the colour of milky coffee, like Josephine Baker, or Jewish like Sarah Bernhardt. Here is a first point: *la Parisienne* is well able to come from Moscow, from the Sugar Islands, or from Castelsarrasin.
>
> *(2009, p. 1998)*

No Strings flouted American racial taboos by portraying its Harlem-born heroine Barbara Woodruff as the embodiment of the 'spirited, emancipated and fashionable Parisienne' (Rocamora, 2009, p. 118). Romance with David Jordan (played by Richard Kiley), a white expatriate novelist from Maine, threatens the freedom and independence that Barbara considers as symbolised by her clothes: a hard-won closet of 'beautiful Paris dresses' by Dior, 'Balmain and Balenciaga and Givenchy' (1962, p. 81) that she has acquired as the 'highest-paid model in Paris' (Rodgers and Taylor, 1962, p. 60). When David asks Barbara, in a final scene heavy with racial subtext, for the model to return to small-town New England with him, Barbara responds: 'I don't think I have the clothes for a rugged, coast-of-Maine woman' (1962, p. 117).

No Strings drew upon Paris's decades-long traditions of expatriate freedom experienced by dozens of African American women like Josephine Baker. At the same time, the musical equally engaged with the gains made by Black women during the Civil Rights era, as designers, models, actresses and glamour icons. As the fabric-abundant New Look turned Paris designers like Christian Dior and Hubert de Givenchy into American household names in the 1950s, the Harlem-based designer Zelda Wynn Valdes (also fabled as the original creator of the Playboy Bunny costume [Diehl, 2018, p. 223]), attained unprecedented crossover success during a time in which 'racial segregation was enforced and a fashion system created by and for Black Americans existed alongside the mainstream fashion industry'. As Nancy Diehl notes, Valdes' 'roster of clients was filled with internationally known celebrities including Josephine Baker, Ella Fitzgerald, Mae West, Jessye Norman, . . . Diahann Carroll, Dorothy Dandridge [and] Eartha Kitt' (2018, p. 223).

While Valdes commanded publicity as a designer during the 1950s and early 1960s, African American women, such as Dorothea Towles and Helen Williams, also crossed the colour line as fashion models. Paris, rather than New York, welcomed these women on its runways. In June of 1962, towards the start of *No Strings'* Broadway run, *Life Magazine* reported:

> For [African American] models, the breakthrough is a dream come true, a dream which is coincidentally being celebrated nightly in the big Broadway

musical hit *No Strings*, which tells about a Harlem girl who becomes a famous mannequin and takes Paris by storm.

(Anon, 1962, p. 87)

Life captioned a glamorous photo of the exuberant, Texas-born Towles: 'Prototype for *No Strings* may have been Dorothea Towles, who was Dior's first Negro model in 1949. Here, she wears a Balmain gown' ('Negro models', 1962). Known for her statuesque beauty, Helen Williams, who modelled for Dior and Jean Dessès, may also have influenced Rodgers and Taylor in the writing of *No Strings*. *Ebony Magazine* profiled the model in 1960:

> It's a long way from Riverton, NJ, to the salons of the great Paris couturiers, but Helen Williams, America's most successful Negro model, made that journey this year, scored a glittering success, and realized a life-long dream.
>
> *('Top negro model', p. 61)*

While drawing upon the convergence of Civil Rights-era progress and New Look fashion, *No Strings* was also conceived by Rodgers as a star vehicle for Diahann Carroll after seeing her on 'The Jack Paar Show'. Throughout the 1950s, Carroll performed on Broadway (e.g. 1954's *House of Flowers*) and in Hollywood where she appeared in film adaptations of *Carmen Jones* and *Porgy and Bess* as well as 1961's *Paris Blues*, a film that will be explored in depth later in this chapter. Yet, Carroll encountered persistent racial obstacles in her career, and by 1961, she was frustrated by the persistent stereotyping of African American women in Broadway and Hollywood casting as what she called the 'the nauseatingly "good" girl who naively trusts everyone' or 'the high-living, easy-come-easy-go sportin' lass' (Cooper, 1962). Carroll recounted to *The Chicago Defender* on being approached by Rodgers for a possible collaboration: 'I told him I wanted to do a contemporary piece, preferably a comedy . . . The idea [of *No Strings*] thrilled me and I said of course I was interested' (Cooper, 1962).

For her work as Barbara in *No Strings* Carroll earned rave reviews as well as a Tony Award for Best Actress in a Musical: 'She is beguiling and lithe and graceful and endowed with that star quality that is encountered all too seldom these days', observed *Newsday* (Oppenheimer, 1962). Carroll also dazzled reviewers and fashion columnists in her array of costumes designed by Donald Brooks. Known for the elegant simplicity and lean lines of his dresses, the American fashion designer created gowns for Jacqueline Kennedy, linking *No Strings* to the liberal idealism of JFK's 'Camelot' presidency and its support of the Civil Rights movement.

The interracial romance at the centre of its narrative featured among numerous elements of Broadway risk-taking in *No Strings*, the first musical embarked upon by Rodgers after the death of Oscar Hammerstein II. Written in collaboration with book-writer Samuel Taylor, a playwright known for the 'smart set' air of his settings (e.g. *Sabrina Fair*, the source of the 1954 film *Sabrina*), Rodgers considered *No Strings* among his most adventurous musicals, telling *The New York Herald Tribune*: 'Playing it safe and doing the old-fashioned thing is really playing it dangerous . . . It is much safer to be new and fresh' (Ross, 1962).

Opening to generally admiring, though not rapturous, reviews, the out-of-town try-out of *No Strings* included performances in Detroit, Toronto, Cleveland and New Haven before the show premiered on Broadway on 15 March 1962 at the 54th Street Theatre. The show had a moderately successful run of 580 performances, its lack of smash-hit status likely influenced by the musical's unhappy ending and uncomforting view on America's racial progress as well as by numerous critics finding the libretto 'on the dull side' (Robert Colman, quoted in '*No Strings*, Rodgers Musical . . .', 1962). Yet, for *No Strings*, Rodgers not only composed a versatile, jazzy score without a string section but experimented with the onstage use of the orchestra: 'In *No Strings*, the orchestra has been taken out of the pit and put on the stage. Several of the musicians have been incorporated into the action and the others are invisible behind a screen' (Ross, 1962).

A structurally sophisticated book by Taylor accompanied Rodgers' musical innovations. The romance between Barbara and David unfolds within a bittersweet framing device of the lovers performing 'The Sweetest Sounds' in twin soliloquies recalling the earlier duet in *South Pacific*. Both sing, on separate parts of the stage, 'The sweetest sounds I'll ever hear/Are still inside my head' (1962, p. 3). In both prologue and epilogue, Barbara and David pass each other by, 'not seeing, unaware' (1962, p. 4), first, because they have yet to meet, later, because the fleeting 'no strings' love affair has been so once-in-a-lifetime intense that its memory must be reframed as unborn possibility. David responds to Barbara's question of 'How can I live without you?' with the proposition: 'Only one way. To say to ourselves that this never happened. . . . You are something that hasn't happened to me, yet' (1962, p. 119).

If words that are 'waiting to be said' comprised a powerful subtext in *No Strings*,[3] Rodgers' reluctance to openly allude to Barbara's race in the Broadway musical sparked intense controversy. Rodgers had drawn upon Carroll's own personal history in the creation of Barbara Woodruff, who tells David that she hails from New York City's 'uptown. Way uptown' (1962, p. 29). *The Pittsburgh Post Gazette* profiled the star's similarities to Barbara Woodruff: 'Our backgrounds are similar. (Like me), she is from Harlem. She has a father who was a bus driver. My father was a subway conductor' (Glover, 1962). Yet Rodgers and Taylor encapsulated their reticent approach to the question of Barbara's race in an opening 'Authors' Note':

> The part of Barbara Woodruff is designed to be played by an American colored girl in her early twenties. It is proposed that she also be beautiful, have style, and wear clothes well; be intelligent, witty, warmly human and wise. The play itself never refers to her color.
>
> *(Rodgers and Taylor, 1962, p. 1)*

The composer elaborated to *The New York Times*:

> We are not dealing with race relations. One of the reasons the setting is France is because such a situation is completely acceptable there. In our show, the point never comes up. The role could be played by a white girl

without a line being changed. We chose Miss Carroll because we've wished for a long time to see in her in something on the stage.

(Funke, 1961)

Walter Kerr, in the *LA Times*, was among the critics who charged that, for all its risk-taking and 'experiments (extending) to virtually every aspect of stagecraft' (1962), Rodgers played it too safe on issues of race: 'It seems unlikely that these two attractive people would not, even causally, mention the matter of race for month upon intimate month. . . . A narrative that means to be courageous instead seems ambiguous' (1962). At the same time, Rodgers and Taylor's hesitance to frankly discuss facts of race in *No Strings* might have emphasised them further and underscored the reluctance of many white Americans to engage in honest and rigorous discussion, despite the progress of the Civil Rights movement.

Yet, while Rodgers' and Taylor's libretto frames 'the interracial aspect of the relationship (as) a muted but significant part of the plot' (Glover, 1962), its cultural subtexts resonate clearly in evoking Paris as a site of liberation for African American women. For the rootless novelist David, a 'Europe bum' (Rodgers and Taylor, 1962, p. 39) who struggles with writer's block, Paris is only the centre of a pinwheel of European pleasure-spots, as he 'knocks around' (1962, p. 11) from Paris to the French Riviera and Monte Carlo. Mollie Plummer, the sardonic, Helen Gurley Brown-like editor of French *Vogue*, advises Barbara to send David home to Maine: 'Back to America, to work. It's the only thing that can save him' (1962, p. 96).

For Barbara, the Paris fashion industry not only signifies work but identity, freedom and a sense of belonging that she has not been able to find in the United States. As a top Paris model, Barbara pursues a life of sexual and economic independence that aligns with the values of Gurley Brown's *Sex and the Single Girl*, published in 1962 (the same year as *No Strings*) and which Stacy Wolf describes as a key influence on 1960s Broadway musicals such as *Sweet Charity* (Wolf, 2011, pp. 58–67). Although she accepts jewels and furs from her infatuated, middle-aged French suitor, Louis de Pourtal, Barbara declares that her modelling work allows her 'to organize her life' romantically, just as it fulfils her professionally: that no one 'annoys' her or 'enjoys' her 'unless we're equal partners in the fun' (Rodgers and Taylor, 1962, p. 31). Barbara expresses no regret about her choice to leave America for France, where she desires – and 'will settle for' – nothing less than 'the world' (1962, pp. 29–30). 'I didn't leave much' (1962, p. 27), Barbara explains to David, elaborating that she tore up her return ticket to America 'the very first hour' after winning a round-trip to the city as first prize in a dressmaking contest: 'As soon as I breathed the air of Paris, I knew I was home' (1962, p. 61). Barbara expresses her sense of Parisian freedom and self-definition in terms that recall the blunter statements from the models from whom *No Strings* drew inspiration. Dorothea Towles told *Women's Wear Daily*: 'For once, (in Paris) I was not considered Black, African American or Negro. I was just an American' (Rourke, 2006).

While leaving much explicitly unsaid on issues of race, Rodgers and Taylor's libretto for *No Strings* clearly evokes Paris's history of African American expatriate

FIGURE 4.3 The African American fashion model and the white writer from Maine: Diahann Carroll as Barbara and Richard Kiley as David in Richard Rodgers' *No Strings* (1962).

Source: Photo by Friedman-Abeles, provided by the editor.

migration, which swelled during the periods following World War I and World War II. Attempting to persuade Barbara not to leave him for the self-destructive David, Louis tells her that only she belongs in Paris: 'And then there are some Americans who have come to Europe to be born', as Barbara replies, 'You're so right; that's me' (1962, p. 40). In the 1920s, dozens of African American artists and performers, including Ada 'Bricktop' Smith, Adelaide Hall and Sidney Bechet, sought artistic rebirth in the City of Light. The pattern recurred in the 1950s, as not only models like Dorothea Towles, but writers and musicians like James Baldwin, Miles Davis and the jazz percussionist Kenny Clarke fled segregated 1950s America, many settling in the expatriate (and Existentialist) colony of Saint-Germain-des-Prés.

Rodgers and Taylor also likely drew upon the previous year's film *Paris Blues*, also featuring Carroll and set in the world of the city's jazz clubs. Although the film elided the interracial romance of the film's 1957 source novel by Harold Flender, the film explored themes of African American expatriatism. In *Paris Blues*, Carroll played Connie Lampson, an independent young woman searching for romance

and adventure in Paris. Vacationing with her friend Lillian (Joanne Woodward), Connie falls in love with expat jazz saxophonist Eddie Cook, played by Sidney Poitier. Committed to the Civil Rights struggle back in the United States, Connie attempts to persuade Eddie to return to New York with her. In a film that explores tensions between collective activism and individual self-determination as contrasting methods of racial resistance, Poitier's Eddie explains his reluctance to return to America. Eddie's dialogue anticipates Barbara in *No Strings*, as he describes his sense of a new home and safety in Paris, where he has resided for five years:

CONNIE: You've never wanted to go back?

EDDIE: You stick around Paris for a while and stretch a bit. Sit down for lunch somewhere without getting clubbed for it, and you'll wake up one day, look across the ocean and you'll say, 'Who needs it?'

(Paris Blues, 1961)

In the final scene of *No Strings*, in which David asks Barbara to return with him to America, the musical's racial themes assert themselves less ambiguously. According to *The Globe and Mail*, script changes made between the Detroit and Toronto try-out runs clarified the American racial prejudice and social ostracism that cuts the strings on the couple's romance:

> But on opening night (in Detroit), this idea of (Barbara and David) finally parting because of the difference in skin color was not at all clearly conveyed. However, with the introduction of new dialogue and eloquent pauses during the lovers' final conversation and duet (of the title song), the fact is made abundantly plain . . . that she, a Negro, would not be socially acceptable in the small community of his birth – even as his wife.
>
> *(Thomson, 1962)*

Over the course of the scene, David realises the extent of Barbara's likely unhappiness in his provincial New England hometown. In Bear Isle, Maine (a state painted less idyllically here than in 1945's *Carousel*), Barbara would have to give up the 'beautiful Paris dresses' that have liberated her in the fashion industry. To Barbara's protests of 'How do I live without you?', David reminds her that she has embraced France as her home: 'You're going to stay here, where you belong.' He laments: 'What a damned foolish thing it is . . . That your warm, lovely world should be so bad for me, and the world I'm going back to so impossible for you' (Rodgers and Taylor, 1962, p. 118). Continuing to explore the themes of interracial romance prominent in his work with Hammerstein (e.g. *South Pacific*), Rodgers drew upon the Paris setting of *No Strings* to glamourise the professional advancements of African American women in fashion – but also to point to the daunting inequitable distances remaining in the United States. If hesitant to join its voice to the full volume of the Civil Rights movement, *No Strings* used resonant contexts and subtexts to celebrate Barbara Woodruff's Parisienne sophistication and her unabashed hunger for the world.

Conclusion: Paris fashion, the Broadway musical and the world

In setting the world of Paris fashion on the Broadway musical stage between 1905 and 1962, *Mlle. Modiste*, *Roberta* and *No Strings* varied in their themes and contexts. Yet the musicals all evoked the emancipated spirit of the Parisienne who puts her claims upon her presence in 'the world': whether epitomised by Fifi in *Mlle. Modiste* wanting to go out in it; by the ex-courtesan Minnie Roberts/Madame Roberta savouring her slice of it; or Barbara Woodruff declaring she'll settle for nothing less than it in *No Strings*. All three musicals also used Paris fashion as a mirror against which to define and reimagine American values. Fifi's epitomising of Theodore Roosevelt's 'Square Deal' in Blossom and Herbert's *Mlle. Modiste* transforms in Kern and Harbach's *Roberta* into the gender fluidity and economic rebounding of early-1930s 'New Deal' America, while the notion that a 'Square Deal' has been achieved equally by all Americans is critiqued and questioned in the more liberated Paris fashion world of Rodgers and Taylor's *No Strings*.

Finally, all three Broadway musicals model American ideals of sophistication, reflecting how its definitions and interpretations have changed silhouette throughout the decades. *Mlle. Modiste*, *Roberta* and *No Strings* measure Parisian values of sexuality and cosmopolitanism against America's enduring Puritan ideals. These musicals contrast the diaphanous silk of Cole Porter's '*quelque chose*' against the rockbound Protestant Work Ethic that brings David Nolan in *No Strings* back to rugged Bear Isle, Maine. Collectively, *Mlle. Modiste*, *Roberta* and *No Strings* suggest that American culture is never that far removed from Plymouth Rock. At the same time, the stylish vision of the Parisienne inspires much of the elegance, sensuality and defiant joie de vivre that – despite the censure of the nation's Sabbots – has always dressed and caressed the Broadway musical.

Notes

1 For Lyda Roberti's Scharwenka in *Roberta*'s bar scene, Kiviette designed a 'black sheer, lustrous striped gown with full skirt and jacket . . . made out of a woven cellulose acetate material called Sylph-Sheen by the Sylvania Industrial Corporation'. Dubbed the 'Gown of Tomorrow', the dress 'appeared in French collections the following season, albeit in different styles' (López-Cydosh, 2018, p. 211).

2 Sinclair Lewis's 1922 satirical novel, centered on the Midwestern businessman George F. Babbitt, led to the coining of the words 'Babbitt' and 'Babbitry' to refer to a 'person and especially a business or professional man who conforms unthinkingly to prevailing middle-class standards' (Merriam-Webster Online).

3 Barbara and David's duet 'Nobody Told Me' also reflects the show's themes of the tacit, the subliminal and the unsaid.

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