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‘The world belongs to the young?’: Age and the golden age diva in *Coco* (1969) and *Applause* (1970)

ABSTRACT

*Among the most pervasive mythologies of the Broadway diva is her evocation of indomitable agelessness. This article considers two musicals that both affirm and complicate the myth of the invincible Broadway diva by focusing explicitly on the ageing of their female protagonists: 1969’s *Coco*, a bio-musical about the life of Coco Chanel, starring Katharine Hepburn; and 1970’s *Applause*, based on *All About Eve*, starring Lauren Bacall as Margo Channing. Engaging with the cultural contexts of the women’s liberation movement and the Vietnam-era Broadway nostalgia boom, both *Coco* and *Applause* appeared as glamorous comeback vehicles for their late-middle-aged, Old Hollywood stars. In the musicals’ frank obsession with age, and with the ageing body of the diva, *Coco* and *Applause* both anticipated Sondheim’s *Follies* (1971), and channelled their creators’ anxieties about the fading cultural status of the Broadway musical (and its Old Hollywood counterparts) in the face of the youthful counterculture.*

KEYWORDS

Broadway divas
Katharine Hepburn
Lauren Bacall
All About Eve
Coco Chanel
Follies

1. Scholars disagree on the range and attributes of a Broadway or Hollywood 'Golden Age'. I use the term to refer to the interwar period evoked in *Follies* and spanning into the 1960s.

'This age obsession of yours...'

During a dramatic scene in *Applause*, the 1970 Broadway musical adaptation of *All About Eve* ([1950] 2008), director Bill Sampson confronts his glamorous and temperamental long-time lover, 40-year-old stage legend Margo Channing, who is suspicious of the machinations of Eve Harrington on her acting career and on the younger Bill. He defends himself to Margo, as played by the equally legendary Lauren Bacall: 'But to come back to the same old fruit stand—this age obsession of yours.... And now this ridiculous attempt to whip yourself into a jealous froth because I spend ten minutes with a stage-struck kid who worships you' (Adams et al. 1970: 69).

During the 1969–70 Broadway season, the American musical – not unlike Margo Channing – developed its own passionate 'age obsession' centred on female star idolatry. At the end of the turbulent and youth-culture-obsessed 1960s, Broadway fixated upon the figure of the ageing diva in two extravagant, camp-flavoured Broadway musicals starring 'one of a kind' Hollywood icons: Katharine Hepburn in *Coco* (1969) and Bacall in *Applause* (1970). At a time in which many creators and critics expressed anxieties about the demise of a mythic Golden Age,¹ both musicals positioned their leading ladies and protagonists as defiant symbols of the Broadway musical's survival. In centralizing mature divas, *Coco* and *Applause* not only anticipated *Follies* (1971) – Stephen Sondheim and James Goldman's ambivalently nostalgic elegy to the inter-war Broadway musical – but offered unusually nuanced portrayals of female ageing that complicated constructions of the diva as a figure who transcends time. Opening in the early phases of women's liberation, both shows also conversed complexly with the cultural movement of second-wave feminism through the figure of the ageing, Golden Age diva.

In casting *Coco* and *Applause*, the musicals' creators looked past traditional Broadway musical song-and-dance stars. Instead, they enlisted the glamour and power of two studio-system Hollywood legends, neither particularly known for her singing voice, and each making her Broadway musical debut. Talk-singing 'The World Belongs to the Young' in a voice 'like vinegar on sandpaper' (Barnes 1969), the 62-year-old Hepburn headlined André Previn and Alan Jay Lerner's *Coco*. 'Suggested by incidents from the life of Gabrielle (Coco) Chanel' (1969: title page), the musical opened at the Mark Hellinger Theatre on 18 December 1969. Four months later, belting the songs of Charles Strouse and Lee Adams in her own 'big applejack-brandy alto' (Burke 1970), 45-year-old Bacall strutted across the stage of the Palace Theatre as Margo Channing in *Applause*, which opened on 30 March 1970, with a book by Betty Comden and Adolph Green.

Set respectively in realms of theatre and fashion, both *Coco* and *Applause* celebrated the long-established Broadway musical icon of the diva. Representing 'the strong, unique woman with a powerful voice' (Wolf 2011: 223), the diva exudes a larger-than-life presence and theatricality, whether as a performer, role or character (Dvoskin 2016: 93). Driving the action of musicals ranging from *Gypsy* and *Hello, Dolly!* to *Dreamgirls* and *Hairspray*, 'the diva's excessive, performative display of self refutes the limits of femininity even as her voice and body are insistently female' (Wolf 2011: 224). As quintessential diva musicals, both *Coco* and *Applause* featured an outspoken, oversized star playing a grandly assertive female character who negotiates life on her own terms, triumphing over obstacles through her glamour and force of will.

On one level, *Coco* and *Applause* affirmed pervasive mythologies of the Broadway diva, and evocations of her indomitable agelessness. 'The subtext of the diva show is survival and the worship of survival of glamorous women.

Men age; female stars go on forever', as John M. Clum writes of Chita Rivera's age-defiant performance as the Hollywood musical *femme fatale* Aurora in *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1999: 189). The gender-transgressive Broadway musical diva has also invited intense identification by women, including the adolescent 'Internet girl fans' of *Wicked* (Wolf 2011: 219–35). Yet mature female stars have most frequently embodied the Broadway diva, whose survival might symbolize her conquest over a humdrum environment (e.g. *Gypsy's* Rose), or even – in the case of *Spider Woman* – mortality itself (Clum 1999: 134–37). As Clum explains of the diva's enduring appeal to gay men, the 'diva mythology of performance' entails 'a fierce act of will in the face of physical limitations and personal unhappiness' that has resonated with decades of systemic oppression, closeting and homophobia (1999: 138).

At the same time, the camp image of the diva as a tough broad 'made of steel' (Clum 1999: 136) has often eclipsed her representation as a flesh-and-blood woman, vulnerable to the ageing process. Contrasting the maturing body of the female star against the 'timeless' Hollywood Golden Age personae of Hepburn and Bacall, *Coco* and *Applause* both affirmed and complicated the myth of the invincible Broadway diva. *Hello, Dolly!* (1964) and *Mame* (1966) had 'featured a strong, singular, middle-aged woman' (Wolf 2011: 72), within the traditions of a form that has long 'been an unlikely haven for older, multi-dimensional women' (Roost 2012: 63). Yet the theme of female ageing explicitly informs *Coco* and *Applause*. In *Coco's* plot of Chanel's 1953 Paris couture comeback, and *Applause's* story of Margo's battle against backstage sabotage, both musicals juxtaposed passionate diva worship of their fabled stars with themes about the complex relationships between femininity, career, beauty and ageing: tensions underlying the diva's public image of 'going on forever'. Both musicals, if particularly *Applause*, reflected Margo's close attention to the female ageing process in *All About Eve*. Assured by playwright Lloyd Richards, 'Margo, you haven't got any age', the star quips sardonically, 'Miss Channing is ageless. Spoken like a press agent' (Mankiewicz [1950] 2008).

While similar in their celebration of the diva's indomitability, as well as their concern with the implications of her age, *Coco* and *Applause* varied in their definitions of divadom. As conceived by Lerner as a theatrical love letter to its extraordinary star, *Coco* affirmed Chanel and Hepburn's mutual divadoms as summits of singular excellence, even while suggesting female independence in the rare and exceptional terms of the diva herself. By contrast, *Applause* – while celebrating the 'One of a Kind' distinction of Margo Channing – extolled the multiplicity of her, and Bacall's, diva personae. Suggesting divadom as a metaphorical condition relevant to *all* women, *Applause* celebrated Margo's unapologetic volatility and vulnerabilities, even as the musical critiqued the sexist and ageist entertainment industry that ultimately impels the star's retirement from the stage. As Bacall commented of playing Margo, '(*Applause*) is really about a woman's insecurities, and Christ, that's always timely!' (Burke 1970).

While *Coco* and *Applause*, on the surface, concern women's insecurities, both musicals reflected deeper cultural concerns about the endurance of the Broadway musical. Like the diva, the Broadway musical asserted its own survival during an era of cultural upheaval intensified by the Vietnam War:

Due to a slow and often unenthusiastic response to the entertainment preferences of a youth market that had begun to exert unprecedented power on the commercial market and thus on cultural tastes, Broadway

suffered rapidly declining audiences and frequent attacks by cultural critics who declared the commercial musical dead or dying.

(Wollman 2013: 90)

In both *Coco* and *Applause*, the diva's age – and concern at her own declining relevance – reflects a Broadway theatre contemplating the prospect of a fading 'golden age of the musical theatre' (Canfield 1970). During the 1969–70 season, the Broadway musical, echoing the fall of the Hollywood studio system, confronted its own insecurities about the rise of the counterculture, and of the Off-Off-Broadway movement that also propelled *Hair* (1968). Ageing, 'but alive', the Golden Age divas in *Coco* and *Applause* spoke to a Broadway musical theatre anxiously self-reflective about its advancing age. At the same time, they reflected the social transformations of the women's liberation movement.

Women's liberation and the Broadway reinventions of Katharine Hepburn and Lauren Bacall

In centralizing two outspoken career women as protagonists, *Coco* and *Applause* engaged strongly with the rise of second-wave feminism. Hepburn and Chanel were already celebrated as an earlier generation's feminist icons: the former with Hollywood classics such as *Woman of the Year* (1942) and the latter with five decades of 'casual but elegant' (Lerner and Previn 1969: 2–2–15) innovations in style and fashion (e.g. women's slacks) geared towards the working woman. Although the cultural influence of women's liberation would intensify throughout the 1970s, the movement accelerated with the 1966 formation of the National Organization for Women (NOW), and the Miss America protest in Atlantic City on 7 September 1968, a 'date often given as the date that modern feminism was launched' (Kurlansky 2003: 308).

Yet the rise of the women's liberation movement also coincided with the decline of both the Hollywood studio system and the prevalence of the 'woman's films' that had formed the core of the 'Dream Factory', as headlined by stars like Hepburn and Bacall. During the 1969–70 season, the timing was right for the two legendary divas to make their musical theatre debuts and lend their star power to a commercially ailing Broadway. In the case of Hepburn, *Coco* represented a Broadway comeback after seventeen years, even as she maintained hard-fought durability on-screen in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967) and *The Lion in Winter* (1968).

Hepburn entered *Coco* on the heels of back-to-back Oscar wins, attracted by the prospect of playing one of the professional women she admired most – and with whom she most strongly identified:

I've felt all along that *Coco* and I were alike.... That we're two females who have never been intimidated by the world, who never shifted our styles to conform to public opinion.... She's not afraid to put herself on the chopping block.... And her capacity for survival is what fascinates me.

(Saal 1969: 79)

Not unafraid to go 'on the chopping block' herself, Hepburn experienced anxiety about headlining a big-budget Broadway musical. She underwent a difficult *Coco* development and rehearsal process, with Lerner desperate to appease Hepburn's insecurities about her lack of musical experience. Lerner

assuaged her with comparisons to his work fashioning *My Fair Lady* for the non-singing Rex Harrison: ‘The reasons for the delay in the script is that after I saw you I had the same reaction that I did when I saw Rex about *Fair Lady*, which was why I began re-writing with – in this case – your face on every page and your voice saying every line’ (Lerner 1967).

If *Coco* offered Broadway audiences a new, singing side of Hepburn, *Applause* offered Bacall nothing less than a chance at professional reinvention – and personal liberation from the shadow of a famous man. Hepburn’s legend was a largely self-sufficient one, her on- and off-screen partnership with Spencer Tracy only one part of the Hepburn mystique. By contrast, Bacall rebelled against decades of association as ‘Bogey’s Baby’ (Burke 1970). Despite earning admiration for her versatility since her pairing with husband Humphrey Bogart (who died in 1957), Bacall continued to be most remembered by audiences for her smoky-voiced siren roles opposite Bogart in *To Have and Have Not* (1944) and other film noirs. Bacall resented continuing definition by her relationship to Bogart: ‘I think I’ve damn well earned the right to be judged on my own, that’s all.... I loved Bogey very much, we had a marvellous life, but that life has been over for 13 years’ (Burke 1970).

Bacall had struggled to find substantive screen roles in the 1960s, and *Applause* marked her return to the Broadway stage, five years after the play *Cactus Flower*. In contrast to Hepburn, Bacall launched herself joyously into *Applause*, which her good friends Comden and Green tailored to her talents. Bacall confessed to reporters of being a ‘frustrated musical star’ (McPherson 1970) despite her lack of obvious singing talent. She exulted to *The New York Times*, ‘I feel so damn right on that stage! I think I’m finally fulfilling the promise I showed and then never realized’ (Burke 1970). As with Hepburn and *Coco*, the press made comparisons to the star who played Henry Higgins: ‘It’s very much the same way as Rex Harrison acted his singing in *My Fair Lady*’, wrote one columnist of the 1973 television adaptation of *Applause* starring Bacall (‘Toni’ 1973).

Broadway’s commercial instability also contributed to the allure of musicals built around Golden Age Hollywood stars. With theatre-honed celebrities like Ethel Merman less common, *The New York Times* observed musicals as increasingly a ‘wildcat venture’: ‘To raise the cash to get started, much less remain open, producers must sign A Star, yet increasingly these days the performers the public knows best have not gained fame or honed their techniques by meeting the standards of the stage’, opined Harris Green (1970). Hepburn and Bacall’s star casting also aligned with the rise of the ‘Big Lady’ show (e.g. *Hello, Dolly!*). As defined by Ethan Mordden:

The Big Lady aesthetic doesn’t tally on talent as much as guts, on a self-willing celebrity—*famous* guts—that virtually forces the public to applaud one’s entrance, one’s numbers, even one’s lines.

(1988: 159)

During the early stages of *Coco* and *Applause*, both Hepburn and Bacall also weathered the media’s obsession with their age. The gruelling pressures on female performers to remain ‘ageless’ had been trenchantly critiqued by Jacqueline Susann in her camp blockbuster *Valley of the Dolls* (1966), in the Broadway-to-Hollywood trials of Anne Welles, Jennifer North, and feuding divas Neely O’Hara and Helen Lawson (the latter two reportedly inspired by Judy Garland and Ethel Merman, and loosely paralleling Eve and Margo in *All*

About Eve). In the backstage novel, Susann savagely portrayed show business sexism and ageism, as well as the forces of internalized female misogyny. In one chapter, while at the El Morocco nightclub, Anne observes 'Helen, with her bloated face and figure. (Anne) ached with compassion for the middle-aged star' (Susann 1966: 101).

Echoing *Valley of the Dolls*, press coverage of *Coco* and *Applause* relentlessly circled in on the actresses' age. Bacall complained wryly to *The New York Times*, '...Listen, will you please tell me, why is one's age brought up every four lines of everything that's written?' (Burke 1970). Indeed, *Life* began its article on Bacall in *Applause*: 'Leaving aside the delicate question of the lady's age, which is only 45 for God's sake [...] it is perfectly natural and right that Lauren Bacall should be making her debut this week as the star of a Broadway musical' (Farrell 1970: 54A). *Life* wrote bluntly of Hepburn in *Coco*: 'She insists her carcass is deteriorating, and wonders if anyone is as old as she is' (Frook 1968: 63).

At once reflecting and critiquing the media's fixation on Hepburn and Bacall's age, both *Coco* and *Applause* engaged in subtle inter-textual dialogue between the musicals' protagonists and the star personas of the divas playing them. Both musicals applied an art-mirrors-life interplay between the real and fictional personas of Hepburn and Chanel, and Bacall and Margo Channing. Both Chanel and Hepburn's paralleled biographies suggested the late-career comebacks of highly independent women who defy their critics, proving their commercial viability and self-worth in maturity:

Both respond belligerently to challenges: witness Coco's comeback or Hepburn's willingness at sixty (sic) to embark on a whole new theatrical departure. Together they speak to a world of the young about the possibilities and even the glories of age—or agelessness.

(Saal 1969: 75)

By contrast, *Applause* spoke to the dilemma of working as an actress within a youth-obsessed entertainment industry. Much as Bacall fought off her former screen personas as 'The Look' and 'Bogey's Baby', Margo – now a former screen siren in *Applause* – faces not only Eve Harrington, but the shadow of her younger self haunting the television screen. In contrasting ways, both *Coco* and *Applause* blended fiction and biography, creating theatrical halls of mirrors that blurred the distance between star and character, ageing diva and 'ageless' mask – or in the case of *Coco*, age-defiance.

'The world belongs to the young – or to me?': Hepburn in *Coco*

Coco opened to advance press as not only Hepburn's musical theatre debut, but as 'the most expensive in Broadway history' with an approximated \$900,000 budget as produced by Frederick Brisson (Saal 1969: 75). Directed by Michael Benthall, with Chanel-esque costumes by Cecil Beaton, and choreography by Michael Bennett, *Coco* received strong accolades for Hepburn, even as the musical itself opened largely to negative reviews and a disappointing run. Prior to opening, the musical was marketed both a star vehicle for Hepburn and an extravagant fashion pageant, 'on the grand scale not seen here since the days of Ziegfeld' (Calta 1969).

Coco evoked critical comparisons to both *My Fair Lady* (1956) and *Gigi* (1958), in its Parisian couture setting and the urbane wit of Lerner's book and

lyrics. At the same time, *Coco* rejected the Pygmalion makeover plot of *My Fair Lady* with its self-invented heroine: ‘When Lerner approached (Chanel) with his ideas for the musical, she flatly warned him, I am not your “Fair Lady.” No one has ever told me what to do or say, and certainly not what to wear’ (Dees 1969). As a woman who ‘never married and never seemed to regret it’ (Deppa 1968), and endowed ‘with a scalding tongue, hair-trigger wit, immodesty, and ineffable charm’ (Nemy 1971), Chanel’s life story both invited and resisted classic Broadway musical templates.

Structurally, *Coco* alternated between the past and the present of fall 1953/spring 1954, when Chanel made her real-life comeback at the age of 70. In the production, Hepburn interacted with film projections representing Coco’s memories of past affairs, as well as of the father who abandoned her as a child. Coco’s memories intensify after she hires Noelle Forrestier as one of her mannequins. The designer sees her own past reflected in the 21-year-old woman: ‘It’s so much like my own life. In modern dress’ (Lerner and Previn 1969: 2-3-25). Also orphaned in childhood, Noelle is ‘torn and undecided’ (Lerner and Previn 1969: 1-2-18) between her affair with journalist Georges Gerin and her new career as a model, just as Coco had once left a financially supportive lover to open her own salon. Much as Coco’s self-sufficiency has threatened the men in her life, the chauvinistic Georges resents Noelle’s career ambitions, informing her, ‘You’ve got a job: me’ (Lerner and Previn 1969: 1-2-11).

In portraying the comeback of its septuagenarian heroine, played by the 62-year-old Hepburn, and written by the 51-year-old Lerner, *Coco* celebrated professional triumph in mid- and later life. At the same time, the show mythologized a Broadway and Hollywood Golden Age reflected in Chanel’s fashions, and increasingly lamented as a parade-gone-by. While *Coco* marked Hepburn’s first Broadway appearance since 1952, the musical also signalled a comeback for Lerner, who had broken up with Frederick Loewe after *Camelot*, and not had a major Broadway hit since that 1960 musical.

Coco’s themes of generational obsolescence, and defiance, paralleled these career anxieties. Rendered passé by the rise of Dior’s New Look, Coco and her Rue Cambon salon staff gather in a room that is ‘totally shrouded, giving evidence of years of unemployment’ (Lerner and Previn 1969: 1-1-1). Coco’s business manager Louis Greff assures her that she is right to retire: ‘Fashion is a different world today.... You’d be crushed. It’s a world that belongs to the young, so let them have it’. At first, Coco agrees, ‘I know, Louis. I am too old’ (Lerner and Previn 1969: 1-1-2). Yet, left alone, and turning to memories of past lovers, Coco changes her mind to get back to work. In her march-like battle cry, ‘The World Belongs to the Young’, Coco invites the ‘sweet birds of youth’ to ‘peck away’, as she readies for her comeback (Lerner and Previn 1969: 1-1-5).

Over the course of *Coco*, Hepburn’s Chanel defiantly orchestrates her comeback against derisive fashion critics, as well as the Eve Harrington-like machinations of rival designer Sebastian Baye. Labelling Coco with ageist epithets – as a ‘jaded old maid’ (Lerner and Previn 1969: 2-1-4) – the character played as an unfortunate gay caricature within a Broadway musical rife with Lerner’s lyrical dandyism and Beaton’s camp extravagance. When Coco’s assistant Madame Pignol queries ‘Is he homosexual?’, Greff responds, ‘I have a feeling he’s way beyond that’ (Lerner and Previn 1969: 1-2-7).

Coco’s title character represents the triumph of an older order of professionalism against youthful upstarts. At the same time, the musical charts an

intergenerational vision of women's liberation, represented by the mutual ambition of Hepburn and Chanel: 'The one thing in my life I have never regretted is independence', Coco tells Noelle (Lerner and Previn 1969: 1-6-56). Taking the latter under her wing, Chanel serves as a mentor and surrogate mother to the young model, whom she tries to steer away from dependence on Georges (who initially desires Noelle as his mistress, not his wife). Throughout the musical, Coco shares stories with Noelle about her own rise to fame in the fashion world, while commenting on the importance of professional autonomy: 'If a man locks up a woman in his own ego, I have a perfect right to try and help get her out' (Lerner and Previn 1969: 1-2-15). *Coco*, in fact, centres the emotional core of its story in the relationship between the older and younger woman.

Yet, in its conclusion, *Coco* contradicts its positive portrayal of Chanel and Hepburn's feminism. Though grateful to Coco, and tempted by the prospect of a career as a model, Noelle ultimately decides to abandon her professional prospects: a decision foreshadowed in the act-one ballad, 'A Brand New Dress'. Still in love with Georges, Noelle tells Coco that she is going to marry the journalist, explaining, 'I have no genius inside me to take care of, and when you said no to Julien, it was because you had fallen in love with your work. I never will.... I don't want to be made into someone no man can satisfy' (Lerner and Previn 1969: 2-3-28).

Noelle's departure prompts *Coco's* final number, 'Always Mademoiselle': both a musical soliloquy and spectacular fashion parade sequence. Here, Coco ponders the sacrifices she's made in never marrying. Inquiring to herself if professional power as a single woman has been worth ending up alone, Coco turns to her memories, 'as one by one fifty years of fashion appear before her' (Lerner and Previn 1969: 2-3-30). The show's mannequins descended a staircase in Beaton's red-hued recreations of Chanel's designs, allowing Coco to comprehend the span of her influence. Affirming that she is ultimately glad to be Gabrielle Chanel (Lerner and Previn 1969: 2-3-30), the designer concludes that she has grown accustomed to her own face. At the end of the number, saddened, but accepting her former protégée's decision, Coco sends an appointment card to Noelle, to fit her for a custom wedding gown.

Although unwavering in its celebration of the older generation, the musical represented an ambivalent response to the feminist movements connecting Chanel and Hepburn with the women's liberation movement. To *The New York Times*, Lerner expressed his great admiration for Chanel and Hepburn, while qualifying his approval with praise for the women's feminine allure:

[...] (Chanel) is, I suppose, the most emancipated woman I've ever met.... (Hepburn), too, has been a very independent woman...in every sense of the word. They're both career women, but they've never lost one ounce of femininity.

(Gussow 1969)

Coco portrays female emancipation as admirable, given acceptably 'feminine' parameters of fashion and style. At the same time, the musical portrays feminists themselves as exceptions to the norm represented by the marriage-minded Noelle. *Coco* followed a line of 1960's musicals that, as described by Stacy Wolf, followed the 1962 release of Helen Gurley Brown's *Sex and the Single Girl*, and included the heroines of *Cabaret* and *Sweet Charity* (both 1966),

as well as the ‘middle-aged Single Girls’ of *Hello, Dolly!* and *Mame* (Wolf 2011: 80). In the latter two musicals, the diva appears as a ‘middle-aged woman whose quirky eccentricity and financial independence not only win her freedom in the musical but utter star power onstage’ (Wolf 2011: 73). Within this tradition, *Coco* celebrates the extraordinary ‘genius’ of its mature Single Girl.

At the same time, *Coco* poses its heroine as a Singular Girl echoing Hepburn’s and Chanel’s own iconic distinctiveness. As *Coco* recounts to Noelle of a former lover, ‘I remember telling Charles once...there are lots of duchesses, but there is only one Chanel’ (Lerner and Previn 1969: 1-6-56). Despite its fashion-show opulence, *Coco* was likewise dominated by the ‘fantastic individuality’ (Glover 1969) and ‘idiosyncratic extravagances’ (Kerr 1969) of Hepburn. Kerr observed, *Coco* ‘is, as evening, plainly and simply about a phenomenon called Katharine Hepburn’ (1969). *The Chicago Tribune*’s Leonard echoed this in his appraisal of *Coco*’s touring production: ‘*Coco* is one of the biggest, gaudiest, most ornate musicals in years, and yet, it’s a one-woman show’ (1971).

Ultimately, *Coco* positions the self-sufficiency of a woman’s career – like the divadom of Hepburn – as exceptional. While echoing Lerner’s deep admiration of his leading lady and protagonist, *Coco* sent conflicting messages. While claiming, ‘The World Belongs to the Young’, the musical’s narrative suggested that women’s full professional dedication belonged to the few. At the same time, reflecting the ‘discrepancy [...] between the ideological work of the image or representation [...] and the ideological effect that emerges from the power of performance’ (Wolf 2011: 55), many women in the audience may not have gotten the message. As Leonard noted, ‘There was also hand clapping for several strong remarks about women’s rights to independence, rather than dependency on men. That was the women applauding’ (1971).

‘I’m a thousand diff’rent people / Every single one is real’: Bacall in *Applause*

Like *Coco*, *Applause* engaged complexly with feminism, offering a powerful doubling of diva presence in Bacall and Margo Channing. In its adaptation by Comden and Green, *Applause* followed the narrative contours, and conservative denouement, of *All About Eve*.² Famously, the film culminates with Margo’s retirement from the stage, with her famous speech: ‘That’s one career all females have in common – whether we like it or not – being a woman’ (Mankiewicz [1950] 2008). As *The New York Times* observed, ‘It’s a pity that *Applause* has to carry over slop about the superior values of married life from *All About Eve* [...]. At least Bacall’s tawny allure remains thoroughly undomesticated as she prowls the stage of the Palace’ (Green 1970).

At the same time, *Applause* foregrounded Bacall’s complexity, as well as grit and intelligence, in the role immortalized by Bette Davis. The musical, which was directed and choreographed by Ron Field, also transferred the narrative focus from *All About Eve* to *All About Margo* (Comden and Green 1970). While *Applause* echoed *Coco* in its ‘one of a kind’ protagonist (Adams et al. 1970: 125), the former musical complicates the latter’s portrayal of divadom. *Applause* celebrated the multiplicity of personae embodied by Margo Channing – and by extension, Bacall. At the same time, *Applause* paid tribute to the ‘difficult’ qualities traditionally associated with the diva, as the musical celebrates Margo’s toughness and temperament through unapologetic female spectacle in numbers like, ‘Fasten Your Seatbelt’.

2. Comden and Green based *Applause* both on the original story by Mary Orr, and ‘a limited amount’ of the film script by Joseph L. Mankiewicz (Gent 1970).

3. An earlier draft of *Applause* contains a cut reference to diva worship and drag. Duane tells Margo of her fans at the Village gay bar, 'You're one of their living idols. A friend of mine even makes up like you' (Adams et al. n.d.: 1-4-1).

Playing for 896 performances at the Palace Theatre, *Applause* was both more critically and commercially successful than *Coco*. Like Hepburn, Bacall earned glowing critical accolades. Clive Barnes observed: 'Whatever it is Miss Lauren Bacall possesses she throws it around most beautifully, most exquisitely, and most excitingly in a musical called *Applause*' (1970). Praising a libretto 'preserved in the most astringent aspic' (1970), Barnes also noted *Applause's* resemblance to, and departure from, the Cinderella narratives that dominated Broadway from the 1920s through the 1950s (Cantu 2015):

As a theme it has a certain guts to it, if only because it is the rags-to-riches Cinderella story told from the viewpoint of the lady who was the princess when Cinderella was still barefooted. And it is not too kind about the way Cinderella got her crystal slipper up there to the top.

(Barnes 1970)

As with *All About Eve*, *Applause* sympathetically depicts Margo's pressures as an ageing actress in an industry that prefers ingénues. She confides to Bill, 'Yes, yes, I know – I lost your biggest laugh [...]. It reminds me, and the audience, I'm playing someone considerably younger than myself' (Adams et al. 1970: 12).

Applause also recast the story as a 1970-set backstage musical, allowing Comden and Green to infuse the musical with their trademark show business parody, and Bacall's Margo to navigate a dynamically shifting Broadway. Transformed from the long-time star of the Broadway 'legitimate theatre' in *All About Eve*, *Applause's* Margo – echoing Bacall – is a former movie siren who has reinvented herself on the stage. The 1970-set musical is filled with references to Harold Pinter, Edward Albee, and *Oh! Calcutta!* as well as *Hello, Dolly!* and *Cabaret*, even as earlier drafts of *Applause* contained sly allusions to Andy Warhol, Jacqueline Susann, and Susan Sontag, whose 'Notes on Camp' had made literary shockwaves in 1964.

The camp aesthetic and diva worship are essential aspects of *Applause*. Singing 'But Alive' in her dressing room on opening night of her latest hit play, Margo charts the volatility of her emotions. She confides that she feels simultaneously calm and panicked, as well as both 'younger than springtime' and 'older than Moses' (Adams et al. 1970: 21). Exclaiming, 'I'm too exhausted to go to the (opening night) party [...] but I'm much too excited to go home to sleep' (Adams et al. 1970: 21), Margo sweeps Eve and Duane, her 'hairdresser, buddy and confidante' (Adams et al. 1970: 6), off to a Greenwich Village gay bar to celebrate.

Opening less than a year after the Stonewall riots, *Applause* tapped into the energy of gay liberation. Though not without aspects of stereotype, the musical departed from the representation of gay men as 'the evil, bitchy queen; the swishing, squealing sidekick' (Wollman 2013: 72) that had appeared as recently as *Coco*. Making history as 'as the first likeable openly gay character in a Broadway musical' (Kenrick 1996), *Applause* featured Lee Roy Reams as a witty and sympathetic Duane (the counterpart to *All About Eve's* Birdie), while openly alluding to gay culture and its icons with celebratory fervour. 'This is a historic moment. We light candles in front of your picture!', gushes a Village bartender to Margo in front of 'posters and large photographs of movie idols', including Judy Garland (Adams et al. 1970: 23).³ Margo assures them she's not leaving, 'Silly boys...I'm here for the night!', while soaking up 'an atmosphere of total adoration and no competition' (Adams et al. 1970: 24).

At the gay bar, Margo reprises a disco-inflected 'But Alive'. Lifted physically and metaphorically aloft by her gay male fans, Bacall-as-Margo dances with them giddily, while testifying to the multiplicity of her moods. She compares her hot-and-cold emotions to, respectively, Tijuana and Boston, while also expressing her eclectic affinities to both Jane Fonda and Jane Austen (Adams et al. 1970: 24). Here, Margo pictures herself in terms of her vitality rather than youth, a vitality fuelled by her fans' diva worship of 'the tremendous strength that replaces youth, sex appeal, flesh appeal' (Clum 1999: 138). At the same time, in comparing herself to the seductive Fonda, Margo celebrates the flourishing of her sexuality, as a middle-aged woman, while contrasting herself with the critics, producers – and, eventually, the self-serving Eve – who seek to define her by her age and desirability.

The solo number 'Who's That Girl?' also channels Margo's complexity, and the multiplicity of her personas. Inviting Eve and Duane back to her apartment after the jubilant Greenwich Village night, Margo spots her younger self on the screen in an old movie, *Victory at Dawn*: 'Good God, another Margo Channing Festival!', she proclaims 'disgustedly' (Adams et al. 1970: 32). Yet Margo quickly becomes fascinated by the film, reminiscing to Eve in the third person:

Look at her! She was nineteen and a big blinding movie star. The year Bill Sampson fell in love with her. He was twelve. He worshipped her from afar...from a second balcony in Jersey City. In love with a shadow.
(Adams et al. 1970: 32).

Yet the vision of Margo's younger 'shadow' is less a cause for self-delusion and despair, à la Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard*, than for a wry and self-aware duet with the girl on the screen. Margo recognizes her as – not unlike Bacall's former persona as 'The Look' – an image constructed by the Hollywood studio system. 'What *are* I? ... And which (Margo) does (Bill) want to marry?', she asks Eve. With ironic theatricality, the diva assumes a series of poses as 'Margo today', then 'Margo onstage', and finally, 'Miss Eternal Second Balcony', before 'sticking her tongue out at the image on the screen' (Adams et al. 1970: 33). Through the course of the boogie-woogie-style number, Margo makes a series of affectionately self-effacing jokes at the image of herself as 'Queen of the forties flicks', while alluding to young Margo's falsies and scarlet 'Tangee lips' (Adams et al. 1970: 34). More so than *All About Eve*, *Applause* depicts moments in which Margo bonds in friendship with the duplicitous Eve.

Applause celebrates not only the multiplicity but the volatility of the diva: rooting Margo's diva behaviour away from conventional judgements of female neurosis and hysteria, and into a rebellious tongue-sticking against the entertainment industry's biases. At the end of *Applause*'s first act, Margo throws a welcome-home party for Bill, who has been filming a movie in Rome, and mistakenly accuses him of flirting with Eve (representing Sigmund Freud in a guess-who game). When Bill accuses Margo of a 'paranoiac insecurity you ought to be ashamed of', Margo comes back: 'Paranoiac. A term you picked up, no doubt, from the vivacious Dr. Freud!' (Adams et al. 1970: 69).

More than 'a wee bit tight' (Adams et al. 1970: 79) after her fight with Bill, Margo launches the ensemble number, 'Fasten Your Seatbelt'. A prolonged musical tantrum, the number raucously celebrates female spectacle and impropriety. To brassy 'stripper music', Bacall's Margo takes a boa and 'executes some deft bumps and grinds and stripper walks', while singing

'It's going to be a bumpy night!' (Adams et al. 1970: 75). Although the jealous Margo makes a nuisance of herself, and insults her friends, she defends her right to expressing her frailties and anxieties: 'I'm sorry I behaved badly... No, I'm not! My friends should know that's not the real me! ... Yes, it is. I'm the worst. (*Brightening up*). Not always! Sometimes I'm adorable!' (Adams et al. 1970: 75). Margo then reprises 'But Alive', proclaiming her 'thousands' of personae and 'millions' of feelings, as well as the authenticity of *all* of her emotions (Adams et al. 1970: 80).

Applause preserved the retrogressive ending of *All About Eve*, as Bacall's Margo sings of being a devoted, marriage-oriented wife (in 'Something Greater'), after she steps down from the stage (Adams et al. 1970: 146). At the same time, *Applause* asserted the right of Margo – and Bacall – to raise her voice, cause a scene, and thwart stereotypes about age-appropriate female behaviour with defiant bumps and grinds. In this way, *Applause* contrasted with *Coco* in its portrayal of divadom as a wide-ranging metaphor for women's temperament and vulnerabilities in the face of ageism and sexism, rather than an exceptional distinction reserved for icons like Hepburn and Chanel.

'It's No Calcutta': The golden age diva as symbol of Broadway

In *Coco*, Chanel asks rhetorically of her own comeback, 'Does she truly believe the older generation can rebel against the younger?' (Lerner and Previn 1969: 1-5-43). Through the symbolic triumphs of their indomitable divas, both *Coco* and *Applause* answered – if insecurely – that it could. By the 1969–70 Broadway season, the times had already changed at a rapid pace, transformed by the countercultural voices stemming from 'the eruption of a socially and politically engaged Off-Off-Broadway':

...Joe Cino's Caffe Cino and Ellen Stewart's Café La Mama introduced a succession of innovative young playwrights...while groups like the Open Theatre and the Living Theatre opted for a politically radical, performance-based theatre based upon improvisation and ensemble work.

(Gundlachtt and Savran 2014: 81)

The epochal 1967 Public Theater and 1968 Broadway productions of *Hair* permanently altered the landscape of the Broadway musical, infusing the genre with Off-Off-Broadway's radical politics and experimentalism, as well as rock music and hippie youth culture. *Hair's* famous scene of onstage nudity also ushered in Kenneth Tynan's erotic revue, *Oh! Calcutta!*, directed by the Open Theater's Jacques Levy, and featuring sketches by a hip list of heavyweights including Tynan, Sam Shepard, Jules Feiffer, John Lennon and Samuel Beckett. Marketed as a 'highbrow burlesque' (Wollman 2013: 27), *Oh! Calcutta!* capitalized on the sexual revolution for 1314 performances despite largely negative reviews. As Off-Off-Broadway expanded its influence on Broadway, musicals like *Coco* and *Applause* became increasingly viewed as outmoded, with headlines proclaiming, 'Hepburn's Hep but *Coco* Isn't' (Wilson 1970a). Broadway's sound also fell behind the times, as Kelly Kessler notes: 'As the genre aged and avoided these emerging musical forms (i.e. rock), the success of the Broadway pop single also waned. Consequently, the sound and audience aged with the genre' (2010: 17).

The creators of *Coco* and *Applause* attempted to defend their turf in the decade's theatrical culture wars. To mixed success, both shows attempted countercultural savvy, with *Applause* dropping lyrical references to 'pot and

booze' (Adams et al. 1970: 52) and *Screw Magazine* (Adams et al. 1970: 115), and Hepburn briefly cursing in *Coco* (Barnes 1969). Yet in both *Coco* and *Applause*, the Golden Age divas of Hepburn and Bacall represent an older order of generational values, with *Coco* proclaiming before launching upon her comeback, 'The day of the couturier and real artisanship is over' (Lerner and Previn 1969: 1-1-2). For many members of the 'Greatest Generation' to which Hepburn and Lerner belonged, the Broadway musical and studio-system Hollywood channelled values of camp artifice and elegant craftsmanship. These artists more tentatively engaged with the sexual bluntness and rebellious edge represented by Off-Off-Broadway, *Hair* and *Oh! Calcutta!*, as well as the cinematic counterpart of New American Cinema represented by films like 1967's *Bonnie and Clyde* (Kessler 2010: 19).

The creators of *Coco* and *Applause* both directed satiric critique at Tynan's nude revue. *The New York Times* quoted the librettist on *Coco*, "'It's No Calcutta,'" said Alan Jay Lerner [...] "The sexiest show in town! Clothes!"' (Gussow 1969). With *Applause*, too, Comden, Green, Strouse and Adams spoofed *Oh! Calcutta!* In the title production number, performed by Broadway gypsies at Joe Allen's restaurant, the ensemble performs atop a makeshift stage:

They put on a rousing, satirical show, starting with take-offs of show-stopping moments in the annals of musical comedy history, ranging from a *Rose-Marie* duet à la Jeanette MacDonald/Nelson Eddy, through *Hello, Dolly!*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Cabaret*, *West Side Story*, all using the word 'applause' somewhere in the lyric, and finally windowing up with a competition between three gypsies trying to do a wholesome rendition of *Oklahoma!*, while to their horror, three others are yelling '*Oh! Calcutta!* and stripping down to their bare bottoms.

(Adams et al. 1970: 52–53)

Comden and Green also contrast Margo against Eve's representation of a more youthful theatrical landscape. Eve, who claims to have spent time in San Francisco after losing her husband in Vietnam, has 'done Pinter and Albee' (Adams et al. 1970: 15) at the local Madison Dramatic Society and professes to prefer theatre with less room for divas, opportunistically telling columnist Stan Harding: 'I mean, she represents an old theatrical tradition, when a star was a star! I do think that today, however, in contemporary plays, that must be dropped... ' (Adams et al. 1970: 114). Margo associates Eve with a new wave of theatre, jealously telling Bill, 'Fine. Help her [...] Let her run around naked off-Broadway someplace' (Adams et al. 1970: 90). If Eve rises to her own divadom in *Applause* (as 'the bad diva [who] earns the curse of divadom' (Clum 1999: 180)), she also represents a counterculture-tinged threat to the 'Big Lady' tradition of Broadway represented by Bacall's Margo (who, while appearing in straight plays, is firmly identified with the commercial artistry of Broadway). While also critical of *Applause* as 'old-fashioned' (1970b), as contrasted with the contemporary 'gospel and blues' score of *Purlie* (1970b), music critic John S. Wilson wrote of *Coco*:

If the period of the musical theater that began with Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* and hit its peak with Lerner and Loewe and *My Fair Lady* has actually run its course - and whatever blood remains in it has been getting thinner and thinner - *Coco* provides it with a reasonably graceful and appropriate terminal point.

(Wilson 1970a)

4. A contested term, the 'concept musical' has also been described as the 'modernist musical' by Mast (1987: 321). Kelly Kessler identifies a cinematic counterpart in the 'ambivalent musicals' of the 1960s–80s that subvert the conventions of the 'arcadian musical' that dominated Hollywood from the 1930s–50s (Kessler 2010: 9–10).

Wilson observed, *Coco* 'makes a fitting point on which to close the books on this phase of musical theater'. The next Broadway season, however, brought *Follies*: a musical that contemplated just that question.

'But alive': *Coco*, *Applause* and *Follies*

In 1971, Frank Rich, then a student critic for *The Harvard Crimson*, observed that, with *Follies*, Stephen Sondheim and James Goldman were 'in essence, presenting their own funeral' (Chapin 2003: 194). Often viewed as a reflection on the demise of Broadway's mid-century Golden Age, *Follies* had been, in part, inspired by a photograph of Gloria Swanson standing in the ruins of the Roxy Theatre. At a time when Broadway audiences craved nostalgia, Sondheim's brilliant pastiche score evoked the sounds of Gershwin and Berlin, while Golden Age Hollywood stars such as Alexis Smith, Gene Nelson and Yvonne De Carlo also lured audiences of a certain age. At the same time, *Follies* looked unflinchingly at themes of time, memory, ageing and regret. Sondheim later explained, 'It's (about) how all your hopes tarnish and if you live on regret and despair, you might as well as well pick up, for to live in the past is foolish' (Chapin 2003: 314). For all its association with nostalgia, *Time* critic Stefan Kanfer described *Follies* as 'the show that turned the American musical theater around and pointed it forward' (1971; quoted in Chapin 2003: 311). The musical joined *Company* at the vanguard of the new wave of 1970's 'concept musicals' marked by their self-reflexivity, anti-heroic protagonists, and tonal and narrative ambiguity.⁴

At the same time, the diva musicals of the 1969–70 season likely exerted a strong influence on *Follies*. Michael Bennett's choreography and co-direction (with Harold Prince) of *Follies* had been anticipated, the previous season, by his work choreographing *Coco* – an opulent musical with a Ziegfeldian aesthetic. While *Coco*'s staircase-descending mannequins may have presaged *Follies*' Weissmann Girls, numbers in *Applause* and *Follies* also demonstrate striking similarities. *Applause*'s 'Who's That Girl?' anticipates the wry 'Who's That Woman?' of *Follies*, as well as its ghostly mirror dance between past and present. Both 'Who's That Girl?' and 'But Alive' anticipated *Follies*' 'I'm Still Here', as diva anthems sung by a tough, shape-shifting actress. De Carlo's Carlotta Campion evoked Bacall's Margo, in her lyrical progression from being cast as a 'sloe-eyed vamp', to mother, to an embodiment of camp (Goldman and Sondheim 1971: 57). As Chapin details, 'I'm Still Here' was added late in the Boston previews of *Follies* and was deemed 'just what the show had needed' to balance the book's elegiac tone with the diva's buoyant resilience (2003: 248).

Like *Coco* and *Applause*, *Follies* makes explicit connections between the ageing body of the diva, and the ageing Broadway musical. Contrasting the corporeal body of the diva with its vanished showgirl ghosts, *Follies* locates in Carlotta the Broadway musical's capacity for transformation and perseverance. The character echoed John M. Clum's description of Bacall in *Applause*: 'She represents two essential aspects of the Broadway diva. She is a figure of nostalgia and she is a survivor in a show about survival' (1999: 180). Though considerably more 'old-fashioned' than *Follies* in their nostalgic evocation of Broadway's Golden Age (echoed, in *Coco*, by the inter-war elegance of Chanel's fashion), both *Coco* and *Applause* share with *Follies* themes of female self-reinvention: themes closely tied to the star myths of the Hollywood 'Dream Factory' that sent Hepburn, Bacall and De Carlo to Broadway at the turn of the 1970s, and that in turn, fuelled the forward-looking innovations of *Follies*.

Ultimately, in facing a metaphorical mirror at the turn of the 1970s, and confronting its own age, the Broadway musical placed an unusually substantive focus on themes of women and ageing. If *Coco* and *Applause* portrayed the ageing diva as a camp symbol of Broadway, the two shows also transcended the symbolism in the real bodies and voices of Hepburn and Bacall, around whose idiosyncrasies and multiplicities the musicals were constructed. Unevenly progressive in their engagement with the gay rights movement and women's liberation, the two musicals nevertheless made strides in foregrounding the diva's age, while representing it as only one part of her variety and complexity.

The example of *Coco* and *Applause* might continue to be felt in the survival of the diva musical, which shows no sign of vanishing from the resurgent Broadway of the twenty-first century. Joining a 2016–17 season rich in revivals starring mature divas (including Glenn Close in *Sunset Boulevard* and Bette Midler in *Hello, Dolly!*), Scott Frankel and Michael Korie's *War Paint* ran on Broadway from April to December 2017. *War Paint* evoked *Coco* and *Applause* in mirroring the lives and careers of cosmetic titans Helena Rubenstein (Patti LuPone) and Elizabeth Arden (Christine Ebersole). Rivals who never meet, the two are also bonded together in battle against societal sexism and the beauty myths they helped perpetuate. Far from depicting her as invincibly ageless, *War Paint* may follow the lead of *Coco* and *Applause* in pointing to more nuanced representations of the Broadway diva's glamour and power – even while continuing the musical's long tradition of claiming the world for not only the young.

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