

***Glee*: Give Us Something to Sing About**

Kelli Marshall

The roundtable discussion question that most interests me is this one: "How does *Glee* reinvigorate or restructure the musical genre and musical performance?" The good news: *Glee* has perhaps reinvigorated people's interest in the musical. The bad: in its attempts to restructure the genre (i.e., make it cool), the show often forgets and/or refuses to implement some of the basic (and still functional) conventions of the musical, specifically *integrated numbers* and *paired segments*; as a result, the show often feels uneven and flounders critically.

In interviews, *Glee*'s creator/writer/producer, Ryan Murphy, has made at least three claims that indicate his misunderstanding of the musical genre and (some of) the fans who support it. First, Murphy explains his overriding rule for the show: the cast will *not* "suddenly burst into song." When the characters sing, Murphy claims, they will do so only when they are on stage practicing or performing, in the rehearsal classroom, or in a fantasy state (i.e., a performance in their head "that has been routed in the stage"). Limiting the numbers to these three situations, he believes, will make *Glee* "more accessible to people."

There are a couple of reasons this logic is, for lack of a better word, hogwash. To begin with, fans of the musical genre *expect* (and dare I say, *want*) characters to burst into song and dance whenever they feel like it; that is the primary reason we're watching, right? If Murphy is worried about modern-day viewers suspending their disbelief, he should listen to the show's noticeably over-produced soundtrack, rethink its outlandish fake-pregnancy storyline, ditch Sue Sylvester (Jane Lynch), and address those musicians who appear out of nowhere and kids who can magically execute the same choreography on a whim. Furthermore, don't tell Murphy, but some of *Glee*'s numbers are in fact classically integrated (e.g., "[Bust Your Windows](#)," "[House Is Not A Home/One Less Bell To Answer](#)"); in other words, the lines are blurred between narrative and number, and the spectacle is (gasp!) not performance-based. Perhaps Murphy *thinks* he's presenting these numbers within a character's fantasy, but he's really not. Like "Isn't It a Lovely Day to Be Caught in the Rain" (*Top Hat*), "Good Morning" (*Singin' in the Rain*), and "Summer Lovin'" (*Grease!*), these numbers essentially function as The Event, not a dream.

Murphy also admits in interviews that he bases *Glee*'s musical numbers on "stuff that I like and that I think fits the characters and moves the story along." Furthermore, he feels compelled to offer a little something to everyone: "We have a hip-hop [song]. We have a Top 40 [song]. We have country." On its surface this is perhaps fine--after all, several MGM musicals are nothing but a hodgepodge of popular music wrapped around a conventional story--but like all genres, television shows included, musical narratives necessitate some structure.

This leads me to Murphy's third claim, which continues to imply that he sometimes misreads the musical genre. He says that with *Glee* he is creating a "postmodern musical" in the vein of *Chicago* (Rob Marshall, 2002) or *Moulin Rouge* (Baz Luhrmann, 2001). Further, when speaking, he's very careful to distinguish the newer model from its classical predecessors. But he shouldn't. What Murphy ostensibly fails to realize is that his inspirations--while perhaps modern in look, themes, and style (editing in particular)--still conform to the structure of the classical musical. Indeed, like their forerunners from the '30s, '40s, and '50s, both *Chicago* and *Moulin Rouge*

break verisimilitude, delight in the use of supradiegetic sound, and perhaps most significantly, operate almost exclusively through doubling or paired segments (e.g., thematic, rhythmic, sexual comparisons/oppositions).¹ *Glee*, on the other hand--a postmodern musical wannabe--does *not* feature this doubling, at least not reliably. If it did, maybe it would feel less schizophrenic, and its reviews would be more consistently, ehem, gleeful.²

Notes

¹ For example, according to Marsha Kinder, *Moulin Rouge* is "structured by a series of repetitive performances that create a dizzying spiral of doubling" (e.g., the soundtrack's "poached lyrics" and refrains, repeated rehearsals and flashbacks, and the title of the musical within the musical, *Spectacular Spectacular*). Similarly, Karen Perlman identifies the overall structure of *Chicago* as "actually quite classical and balanced in its rhythmic organization" (e.g., it both begins and ends with "a wild frenzy of murder, jazz, sex, and dance," and it features a "musical number roughly every eight to twelve minutes throughout the film, each triggered by the opening of a dramatic question").

² I've written in depth on *Flow TV* about this particular problem: <http://flowtv.org/2010/07/glees-unevenness-explained>.