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The Good War?: Reinterpreting the Second World War in Contemporary Musical Theatre

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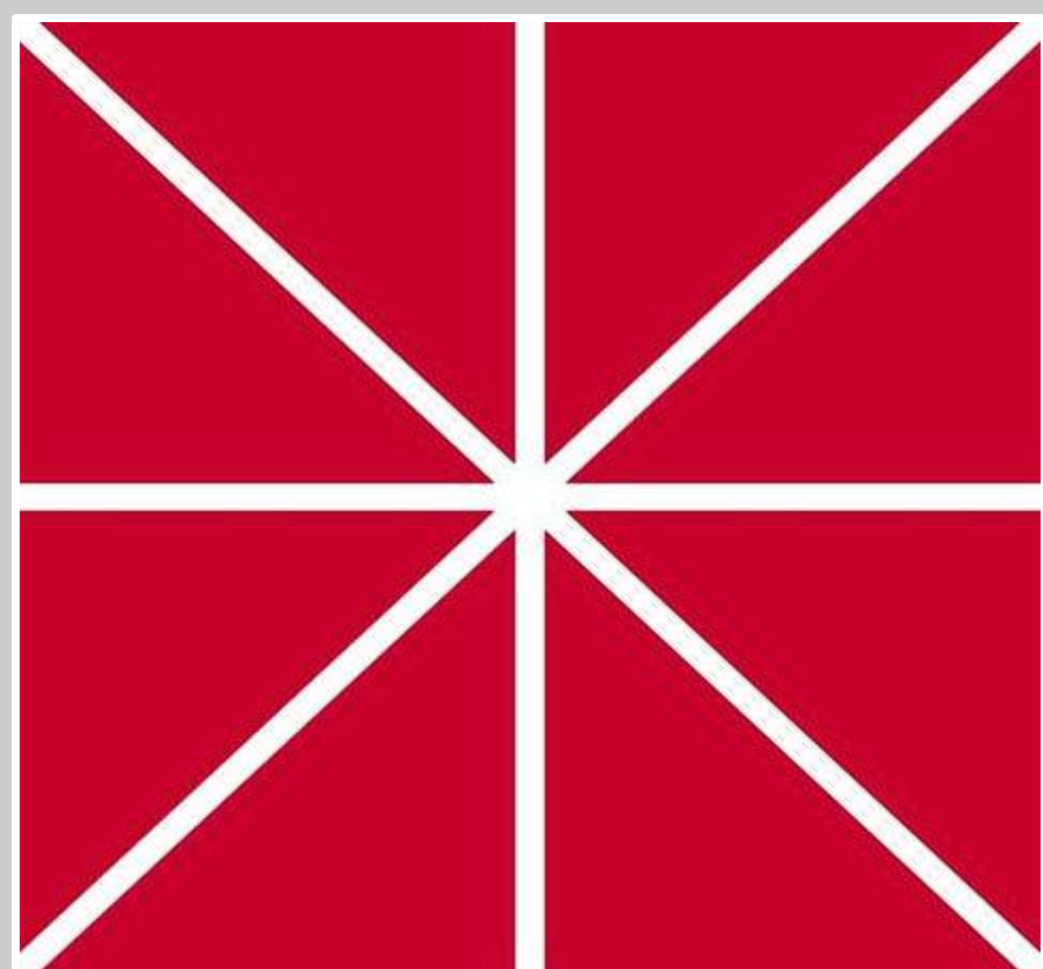
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Comments

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The Good War?: Reinterpreting the Second World War in Contemporary Musical Theatre

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Recent Musicals and Portraying the Second World War

In the last five years, the New York theatre scene has seen three musicals that renegotiate myths of World War II onstage. *Allegiance* (2015), *Bandstand* (2017), and *Alice by Heart* (2019) move depictions of World War II in American musical theatre away from mythologized and romanticized memory and towards a more honest, objective portrayal of wartime and postwar experiences and the associated trauma and displacement as a result of the war. Using archival performances and numerous personal interviews, I argue that by challenging myths surrounding World War II, these musicals' creatives push audiences to reexamine the dominant historical narratives and look at the war more realistically and objectively with 75 years of distance since the war's end.

Allegiance & The "Good War"



Photo © Matthew Murphy

The "Good War": A myth that romanticizes World War II as a golden age, especially because it serves as the last war with clear-cut 'good guys' and 'bad guys.' It serves to ignore wartime realities and injustices in favor of positivity and pro-militarism

How *Allegiance* renegotiates this myth:

- *Allegiance* is one of the first mainstream cultural events to tackle the Japanese American incarceration experience
 - Highlights the harsh realities of camp life for incarcerated
 - Highlights the perseverance and agency of incarcerated to not make them seem as complicit/passive victims
 - Highlights the divisions within camps between No-No's, draft resisters, and those who fought in the 442nd
- Encourages audiences to think about the injustice of American wartime conduct against Japanese Americans and question the government's actions
 - Major example: The irony and cynicism such in the abrupt transition from the Hiroshima bombing number, "Itetsuita" to "Victory Swing"
- Includes historical figures like JACL Liaison Mike Masaoka with controversy surrounding them → confronts issues within the Japanese American community onstage
- Walks the fine line between presenting historical realities while also not being too guilt-inducing or depressing for non-Japanese American (especially white) audiences

Bandstand & The "Greatest Generation"



Photo © Jeremy Daniel

"Greatest Generation": A myth celebrating the personal responsibility, duty, honor, and faith of the wartime generation as the best in America's history. It is centered around both romanticizing their experiences and a sense of national unity.

How *Bandstand* renegotiates this myth:

- Highlights the disconnect in American history and memory regarding the postwar reintegration of veterans
 - Civilian populations romanticize and celebrate veterans as war heroes and expect things to return to normal
 - Veterans felt unable to share their stories and process their war trauma at home due to American popular opinion
- Highlights the numerous different experiences of coming home from war and coping with trauma including PTSD, substance abuse, physical injuries.
- Depicts the musical journey of the Donny Nova Band as they unite and fight for themselves as a community because the rest of America will not support and listen to them to understand their experiences
 - Shatters the idea of unadulterated national unity and can-do attitude of courage and pride
- Provides more realistic depictions of veterans in the media and has cast members perform outreach with veterans of past and current wars

Alice by Heart & "Blitz Spirit"



Photo © Deen van Meer

"Blitz Spirit": A myth focusing on the British people's united front during the London Blitz as a major factor in forming a national identity. It is centered around British wartime stoicism, courage, and endurance in the face of destruction.

How *Alice by Heart* renegotiates this myth:

- Highlights the hardships and divisions within the civilian populations housed in London Underground shelters
 - Contradicts notions of unadulterated national unity
 - Highlights traumatic experiences like air raids through the eyes of children (no performative patriotism)
- Showcases the collective experience of grief and loss as a result of war
 - Confronts grief and hardship as the consuming reality it could be and deemphasizes the notions of hope and courage
- Highlights displacement as a way to cope with war and its consequences both *physically* in the bomb shelter and *mentally* in Alice's dream world
- Physically stages 'Blitz Spirit' onstage with Alice as an 'Anti-Blitz Spirit' character and the Nurse/Queen of Hearts as a 'Pro-Blitz Spirit' one
- The show is not completely absolved of the myth as perseverance is a major theme, but it does add nuance
- The novel adaptation further roots Alice's trauma in war