Dead Girl Walking: Girlhood and Happy-Endings in *Heathers: The Musical*

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This chapter considers how the 2013 musical adaptation of *Heathers: The Musical* (hereafter *Heathers* for brevity) unsettles the gendering of adolescent girls in eighties teen-films, especially in terms of dismantling the traditional idea of the happy ending. The move from screen to stage affords a range of disparate representations not usually found in mainstream Hollywood product. Although itself a populist musical, *Heathers* offers a subtle radicalism in relationship to its construction of gender models for teenaged girls, and it does this through a subtle refiguring of its source material, and in the case of the 2018 West End version, a confident relationship with social media, and the attendant para-social interaction with contemporary fandom.

Girlhoods

In the opening of her book *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory*, Catherine Driscoll reflects upon being given a book by her grandmother at the onset of puberty. She remembers the book:

> tells me that I am now a young woman. It tells me to be proud of that in the rather ominous context of warnings about the physical and emotional distresses of being a girl-becoming-a-woman, as well as the difficulty of getting through girlhood as the right kind of woman.[1]

This sense of 'girl-becoming-a-woman' being fraught with difficulty is a trope explored in a wide range of cultural products and serves as a central theme in both the cinematic and musical versions of *Heathers*. The complexity of social discourse, and the delicate balance

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between conforming to normative patterns of behaviour while still displaying enough individuality to avoid accusations of being ‘basic’, is an abiding theme in much teen fare focussed on the emergence of womanhood.

Released in 1988, *Heathers* came at the end of a decade that had seen the re-emergence of the teen film. No longer a relic of B-Movie / Drive-In culture, the teen film moved away from the beach parties of Annette Funicello and Frankie Avalon to arguably more ‘realistic’ fare, albeit still focused on the representation of wealthy, white, straight, cis-gendered, suburban Americans. 1983 saw the release of a trio of significant coming-of-age movies, films that tended to recycle the same young performers. Although Francis Ford Coppola’s adaptation of S.E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders* was an outlier, it launched the careers of several performers who would appear in subsequent teen-films throughout the rest of the decade.

The other two films released the same year were *Class* and *Risky Business* both of which shared cast-members with *The Outsiders* (Rob Lowe and Tom Cruise respectively). Both films focus on the sexual awakening of their male leads, and both tread the familiar path of older, more sexually experienced women ushering them towards adulthood. In *Class* Andrew McCarthy’s Jonathan enrols at an exclusive prep school, and soon finds himself embroiled in an affair with the more experienced Ellen (Jacqueline Bisset), who turns out to be the mother of his classmate Skip (Rob Lowe). In *Risky Business* Joel (Tom Cruise) employs the services of sex-worker Lana (Rebecca DeMornay), who steals his mother’s Steuben Glass egg. Later, to retrieve the egg, Cruise’s character loses his father’s Porsche 928 in Lake Michigan.

These films set the template that would follow, often linking the loss of property to the loss of innocence. The loss or destruction of cars, houses, stereos, or priceless eggs brought the protagonists into direct conflict with an older generation. This inter-generational

conflict (something we might now understand as a Boomer-Gen X clash) often centred upon the contrast in interpersonal styles and differences in emotional intelligence, a sentiment that finds articulation in *The Breakfast Club* when Ally Sheedy's character opines 'when you grow up, your heart dies'. Material concerns were less pressing in these films than the emotional needs of the characters navigating distant parental figures. As the eighties developed, the focus shifted from stories of young men coming of age, to an exploration of more female-centred narratives. John Hughes oversaw an unofficial trilogy of Molly Ringwald films which saw her play a variety of characters (Samantha in *Sixteen Candles* 1983, Claire in *The Breakfast* Club 1985, and *Andie* in Pretty in Pink 1986), either suburban princesses or girls from the wrong side of the tracks, but characters always in dialogue with wealth, and redemption through romantic love.

As with many cinematic narratives, the boys in these stories are allowed to be messy, complicated, and unpleasant while remaining essentially 'good'. They can make mistakes, be selfish, and still find redemption. In contrast, the films offer more limited templates for girls, who are valued for their goodness and compliance, and punished for any behaviour that is considered aberrant. Certainly, the girls in eighties films do not reflect Sharon Mazzarella's assertion that 'there is no longer a single girl in Girls' Studies'[2]; the successful version of girlhood in these types of films tend toward the singular.

In many ways, *Heathers* serves as a capstone to the teen films of the eighties. Wealth remains a central concern; the characters of Veronica and 'the Heathers' are all wealthy, and as with many of the teen-protagonists in such films, their parents are either absent, ineffectual, or (curiously) both. Set in Ohio in the United States, *Heathers* sees Veronica Sawyer trying to navigate her way through High School in the company of a clique of girls sharing the name 'Heather'. The Heathers' Duke, McNamara and Chandler are the arbiters of

popularity at Westerburg High, and the appearance of newcomer Jason Dean unsettles established hierarchies. Following the accidental death of one of the Heathers, the primacy of the mean girls continues to be undermined in a series of increasingly violent ways. *Heathers* develops the template of the teen movie through the placement of 'mean-girls' as central to the narrative. Co-writer of the musical adaptation, Lawrence O'Keefe, argues that '[w]ithout Heathers, there would be no TV shows for Paris Hilton, Kim Kardashian and Real Housewives everywhere'[3] with *Heathers* also giving birth to a variety of subsequent cultural properties including *Mean Girls*, *Gossip Girl*, and *Pretty Little Liars*. While many of the teen films of the eighties had a cruel antagonist, this role served the 'B' plot, a *deus ex machina* that ultimately drove the hero and heroine towards one another.

Both the film and musical version of *Heathers* interrupts the traditional 'happy-ending', particularly through an unsettling of the construction of girl characters in relation to their 'use-value'. *Heathers* undermines the patriarchal ideal of coupling and in the case of the musical calling into question those 'gender dimensions of musical intimacy [that] arise as learned and intensely emotional practices of intersubjectivity'[4]. Rather than reinforcing heteronormative romantic and sexual relationships as the idealised goal to be attained, *Heathers* rejects the pull of heterosexual coupling as the ultimate in dramatic harmony. Ordinarily, the idea of the happy ending can be particularly potent when considered in relation to the agency of female characters. Often texts render their women docile, subdued by the promise of a heteronormative coupling, one which often positions female characters as a prize. In contrast, the female characters of *Heathers*, who fall just outside of womanhood and instead occupy that complex hinterland of the teen girl, are spared the idea of coupling as a reward, and are instead invited to embrace their girlhood as a potential for redemption. This

version of girlhood is far from the models offered in the other teen films of the 1980s. Rather than side-lining the mean girls, *Heathers* positions them as the active agents, and while Veronica slowly stages a coup against their reign, she only does so after 'Queen Bee' Heather Chandler threatens to 'cancel' her after a vomiting incident at a frat party. Veronica's previous complicity in cruelty, and her subsequent contribution to the deaths of multiple characters suggests that her self-interest motivates her actions as much as remorse. This complexity finds echoes in the writing of Connie Morrison, who notes in her essay 'Creating and Regulating Identity in Online Spaces: Girlhood, Social Networking and Avatars' that:

> [c]laiming identity is a complicated, fluid, and complex process. For girls, it often means actively taking up or denying popular discourses around feminine ideals, to some extent at least, or blindly following along without much consideration of such issues at all.[5]

Gender theorist Rosi Braidotti develops this idea when she observes that "'[i]dentity for me is a play of multiple, fractured aspects of the self; it is relational, in that it requires a bond to the "other"; it is retrospective, in that it is fixed through memories and recollections, in a genealogical process'[6]. This idea of gendered identity as a kind of loose genealogical process speaks eloquently to the way behaviours are passed down, with a recognition that like genealogy, some traits will take hold while others fade, only to reassert themselves in a later 'generation'.

Cultural Reach

Throughout *Heathers* Veronica finds herself negotiating what she knows to be right, balanced against what she must do in the pursuit of High School cultural capital. In most teen-fare, this would be played out in small moments of conformity and rebellion, but the

deaths, some accidental, some deliberate, position *Heathers* as a significantly different from the teen movies that precede it. The adaptation from film to stage smears representation across both form and time, serving as both a (relatively) faithful revisiting of the source material, while nevertheless unsettling the doubtless unintentionally hegemonic ideals of the eighties that were encoded in the film. The process of adapting the film into a musical O'Keefe observes:

> *Heathers* blew a whistle on our entire culture. Reagan's Morning in America had become a hungover afternoon migraine, still shilling candy-flavoured lies about America the infallible [....] Our movie theatres were stuffed to bursting with Rambos, Rockys and almost-but-not-quite-truthful adolescent epics like John Hughes' *The Breakfast Club*, *Sixteen Candles*, and *Pretty in Pink*.[7]

Thus, the cruelty of *Heathers* operates at a different pitch than the products it replaced. Perhaps unsurprisingly this shift was poorly received, and the film did not perform well at the box office, acquiring instead the legacy of a cult classic. This status can be seen not only in the impact it had upon later films, but the way the notion of being a 'Heather' could be understood as a marker of a particular kind of social success and visibility.

Sabrina Strings and Long T. Bui further identify the Heather ideology when discussing *RuPaul's Drag Race* season three: '[i]f the term "Heather" evokes whiteness and refinement, "Boogers" recalls the dirty, unrefined, and grotesque'[8]. Much of the 'story-line' of *RuPaul's Drag Race* season three (2011) focussed on four of the contestants (Manila Luzon, Raja, Delta Work and Carmen Carrera) positioning themselves as the self-styled 'Heathers', and thus casting the other girls in the contest as 'Boogers' (Stacy Layne Matthews, Shangela, Alexis Mateo and Yara Sofia). This Heathers/Boogers positioning in *RuPaul's Drag Race*

identified unspoken racial ideologies, on which String and Bui commented, and it offered an environment where '[t]he white and Asian "Heathers" could transcend their racial / ethnic affiliations and be rewarded'[9]. The adoption of Heathers as a term of power, even though in all iterations the Heathers are eventually brought low gives an indication of the potency of the trope, suggesting as it does that the fate of the Heathers in the film is less significant than their apparent success and social standing. The ubiquity of the 'mean girl' trope, and its appeal beyond the white, cis, heteronormative text from which it emerged, speaks to the assumed power of a certain type of girlhood, and affirms the musical's attempts to interrogate this.

Both the film and the musical adaptation abandon the normative pattern of the romantic lead and his role in 'rescuing' the female protagonist. Men are either toxic (the characters of JD, Ram, Kurt) or ineffectual (all the fathers). The unreliability of men reaches its peak in questions of consent. Heathers offers depictions of men who refuse to take no for an answer; JD (as telegraphed by the initials he is referred by throughout) is the 'cool' kid who assumes that Veronica will fall in love / in line with his plans, even as they become increasingly homicidal. In contrast, Kurt, and Ram function primarily as comic relief: foolish but nevertheless dangerous. The explicit objectification of girls as a normal part of the nascent sexuality of male characters is nothing new in cultural products of this era. It serves to reinforce the idea that 'good girls' are rewarded, and women who are complicated or unpleasant need correction: a correction that often occurs at the hands of an apparently unprepossessing man, and usually through some kind of sexual awakening. That this encounter is overshadowed by the evident problem of consent, merely heightens the objectification of women, and perhaps more worryingly, girls.

The Musical

The film version of *Heathers* offered something of a course correction in relation to other teen narratives of the era, a correction which is developed significantly in the musical adaptation. While the film offers a gentle conversation around consent, the musical offers an explicit critique of non-consensual coupling in the song *You're Welcome*. In the original workshop and off-Broadway versions of the production, towards the end of Act 1, Ram, and Kurt sing *Blue*, initially to Heathers MacNamara and Duke, and then Veronica, about their sexual frustration. Locked out of the car they shared, Veronica appears to have been 'offered up' to Kurt and Ram so that the Heathers do not have to engage in drunken sex. Consent here is confused by two women refusing to surrender to the 'needs' of the alpha-jocks Kurt and Ram, albeit at the expense of Veronica's safety. For the West-End run *Blue* is replaced by *You're Welcome*. Originally conceived for the high-school version published by Samuel French, it was intended to offer a more school-friendly moment, replacing a paean to Ram and Kurt's testicles with a more nuanced response to date rape. Writers Laurence O'Keefe and Kevin Murphy, having been required to provide a toned-down text for school performances were able to reflect upon how *Blue* functioned in the original version and came to prefer *You're Welcome,* believing that it moved away from the comedic tone of Blue and offering Veronica more agency in what a purely comedic exploration of (potential) date-rape was otherwise.

While consent is perhaps convincingly debated in *Heathers* (especially in the newly refigured West End version), and the relationship between Veronica and JD being explicitly positioned as toxic by the end of Act 1, the musical retains flaws. Unlike the 2018 television drama reboot of the film that updates the setting to the 21st-century, the stage version plays out as a period piece with the action set in the late 1980s. As we might expect, the language is therefore similarly inflected with problematic stereotyping and epithets familiar to schoolyard

discourse of the time. This can be heard most clearly in the opening number Beautiful, which offers language such as “homo”, “short bus”, “freak”, “slut”, “bull-dyke”, and “cripple” as part of the schoolyard taunts and insults that Veronica overhears. Arguably, by positioning the work as a period piece, the more problematic elements of the 1988 film can be co-opted without comment. Perhaps the repeated use of ‘homo’ as a term of abuse is the most obvious way in which 1980s language and attitudes towards sexuality are reaffirmed.

Although not focussed on girlhood per se, questions of nascent gender affirmative behaviours emerge most starkly, and arguably problematic at the start of Act 2 when the two fathers of murdered football stars Ram Sweeney and Kurt Kelly, labouring under the misapprehension that their sons died by suicide because of their undeclared homosexuality, come to blows. Bill (Ram’s father) sings of his love for his son in the faux-gospel number *My Dead Gay Son*. As co-writer Kevin Murphy observes:

> [i]n the movie it’s a brief mordant joke - homophobic jock asshole dad expresses love for his gay son for no other reason than because he’s dead. A gay son with a pulse would presumably have been thrown out of the house or worse.[10]

For much of the number, Bill sings of his love for his son Ram, with Paul continuing to hold on to the homophobia evident in the attitudes of their dead progeny. The song is intended (for the most part) to eke out the ‘comedy’ inherent in the original film, and as such is littered with the usual derogatory language (“pansies”, “fruits”, “homos”) here deployed in a pitch-perfect articulation of Linda Hutcheon’s subversion / affirmation expected of postmodern poetics. The result is that for most of the number, the text gets to hold ‘both-and’ positions; while appearing to condemn homophobia, the song allows the audience to continue

to laugh at the idea of being gay, with a range of stereotypes and unsubtle innuendo offered for comedic effect. With references to gay men's 'flair', fondness for disco and Judy Garland, Bill imagines his son and assumed lover to be in heaven, 'dressed up like their favourite Village Person' as 'they swing upon the pearly gates and wear a pearly necklace'. Despite the apparent acceptance that Bill offers, the song itself serves simply to reinforce the played-out trope that gay love is worthy only of scorn and derision. This attitude reaches a sort-of critical mass around two-thirds of the way into the song when Bill proclaims:

> Bill: I'M TALKING YOU AND ME
>
> In the summer of '83
>
> Paul: That was one hell of a fishing trip[11]

As this moment a type of *Brokeback Mountain* intimacy is exposed, so too is the hypocrisy of these two alpha-male fathers, suggesting that their Christian-articulated homophobia has been built upon fabrications, and they are reduced to comedic 'closet-cases'. This revelation appears to absolve them from their previously censorious attitudes, and that despite the fact Bill asserts that 'I used to see a homo and go reaching for my gun', the audience should see them as neutered from this point hence. Their hatred is robbed of its strength because they are revealed as having 'committed homosexual acts' the entire time, compounding the ostensible comedy of the moment.

Genre Implications

While this chapter is focussed primarily upon the gendered identity of girlhood, it seems necessary to spend some time reflecting upon this articulation of sexuality to unpack the musical's broader cultural attitudes. Simply put, can we fully appreciate the representations of redemption through girlhood if the wider production simply serves to reheat worn-out tropes of sexuality and shame? If *My Dead Gay Son* cannot move beyond the parodic, it becomes necessary to question the validity of claiming queer space for comedic purposes and the ways the rest of the musical contributes to cultural hegemony and reaffirmation of privilege. If this song was the final appearance of the characters, and the revelation of their 1983 affair serves only as a punchline, it would be hard to find any redemption for the inclusion of the storyline. Instead, Paul and Bill use the death of their sons as a moment of realisation and use their assumed sacrifice as inspiration to self-disclose their sexual orientation: to come out of the closet and stay out. Despite that this is based upon mendacity devised to disguise a murder, one that once again positions homosexuality as a shaming device, the subsequent choice made by Paul and Bill serves as a genuine moment of transition. By the conclusion of the piece, theirs is the only romantic / sexual coupling to remain intact. While we recognise that this extended consideration of the sexuality of two minor characters has the potential to disorder our consideration of girlhood, it does serve to highlight the text's broader attempts to offer a considered response to the source material and move beyond a simple beat-for-beat remake.

Most evident in the West End version is the casting against type of Veronica, and the presence of a Southeast Asian actor playing Kurt Kelly. Unlike Barrett Wilbert Weed who originated the role of Veronica in the off-Broadway production, Carrie Hope Fletcher was initially subject to online criticism for not looking enough like the filmic version of Veronica, Winona Ryder. Much of the criticism was levelled at Fletcher's body-type, and while her vocal range was considered appropriate for the role, her physicality less so. In casting her

Finkman et al moved beyond the expected tropes, echoed in the casting of Black performer T'Shan Williams as Heather Duke, and Chris Chung as Kurt Kelly.

Perhaps this potential for development and critique lies in the broader cultural legacy of the film, specifically as it offered a step-change in its representation of flawed young women as the central protagonists, its somewhat fairy-tale structure, and the pervading sense of heightened reality, lends itself to the musical form. As with the film version, *Heathers: The Musical* focusses on the High School life of Veronica Sawyer, and the cliques in Westerburg High. Soon, the already complex ecosystem of the school is upset by heightened behaviours of what sociologist R.W. Connell has called 'emphasized femininity', which is articulated as an analogue to hegemonic masculinity: 'performed especially to men'[12]. The welcome made to JD, an archetypal cool kid who establishes himself as a force determined to challenge the existing hierarchy is an opportunity to explore hegemonic gender performances within and beyond? the text. Whilst there is little doubt as to Veronica's attraction to JD, in a move which might well position her as more innocent than her screen counterpart, it becomes clear that he is manipulating Veronica. As the second act develops, the musical version of JD is seen to be rather less straightforwardly 'evil' than the Christian Slater version from the film, giving the audience a clearer rationale for his nihilism. Throughout the adaptation, there is also much closer connection to childhood, with regular references back to shared histories and time in kindergarten, all reinforcing the narratives of becoming rather than being.

Understandably, although staying relatively faithful to the film, the musical's historical context required addressing the cavalier way JD draws a handgun in the school cafeteria. Although High School shootings were a feature of American life in the 1980s (with 51 shootings in that decade), post 2000 those figures increased exponentially, with 64 shootings during the 2000s, and 213 in the 2010s. Seven out of ten of the highest fatality school

shootings happened after 2000. What was merely a sight-gag in the film would not be countenanced on Broadway or the West End. The moral ambiguity of the film was something O'Keefe wrestled with during the adaptation, observing that:

> [the film] has so much fun showing misfit teens wreaking murderous revenge that it's hard to tell whether the filmmakers deplore the violence or endorse it [...] Broadway audiences prefer their morals black-and-white and their endings uplifting-and-victorious: *Hairspray, The Lion King, Legally Blonde*. They don't love having their assumptions challenged.[13]

This assertion that the audiences of musicals have more entrenched morals seems to be challenged by O'Keefe's own approach to his adaptation. Certainly, there are moments in the musical where the complexity of human sexual relationships is made significantly more complex than in the film. Although the two works resonate with one another, the musical is not a simple beat for beat retelling of the film with additional songs. The song *Beautiful*, which introduces us to the main characters, serves as a prologue that is only hinted at within the film. In the film, Heather Chandler says to Veronica after she vomits on the carpet at a college 'kegger':

> Heather Chandler: You stupid fuck!
>
> Veronica: You goddamn bitch!
>
> Heather Chandler: You were nothing before you met me! You were playing Barbies with Betty Finn! […] I got you into a Remington Party! What's my thanks? It's on the hallway carpet. I got paid in puke![14]

This reference to 'before' is all the film offers in terms of a recognition that Veronica was somehow constructed through her relationship with the Heathers. In contrast, the musical

clarifies the process of ‘before’. During *Beautiful*, the audience is shown the relationship between Veronica and ‘Booger’ Martha, the first meeting of Veronica and the Heathers, and the subsequent remaking of Veronica in their image. Through this sequence, the ancillary characters become more than cyphers, and their existing friendships become apparent.

Heathers’ sensibilities have been informed by more than twenty years of critical theory and cultural development. The musical benefits from having been written after the advent of the more sex-positive perspectives of third-wave feminism in the early 1990s, with an attendant shift towards female characters in more control of their own sexuality, and a wider range of hegemonic gender performances. Although the timing of the sex scenes in both the film and the musical remains the same (directly after the vomiting incident), their execution is significantly changed. In the film, Veronica sits at her desk, writing in her diary and railing against the unfairness of her life. JD appears at her window, invites her out to play croquet, and in the following scene the clear implication is that a game of strip-croquet has led to sex.

Given the critique of white male privilege offered in *You’re Welcome*, it should perhaps come as no surprise that in contrast to the film, the musical foregrounds Veronica’s desire, and in *Dead Girl Walking*, sees her climb though JD’s window, and instigate sex with him. Veronica has power in this moment, using the certainty of social ostracism as a driver to pursue JD without inhibition:

Veronica:

Shh...

Sorry, but I really had to wake you!

See, I decided I must ride you 'til I break you!

'Cause Heather says I gots to go.

You're my last meal on death row.

Shut your mouth and lose them tighty-whities![15]

The difference between this Veronica, who rounds out the song 'Slap me! Pull my hair! Touch me there and there and there!' and the one in the film is agency; although there is little doubt that both couplings are consensual and enjoyable (film-Veronica notes that 'It's a lot more interesting than just flinging off your clothes and boning away on the neighbour's swing set'), musical-Veronica is entirely in charge of her own sexual desires, and this is made evident throughout the song. Whether she is using sex as a distraction, to move beyond the pettiness of high-school politics, or as a marker of a threshold is irrelevant, because it is Veronica who is doing the choosing. Arguably it is the very form of the musical that allows this clarity of desire to be communicated. Unlike more realistic texts, the heightened states of the musical remind us that we 'listen to music in order to dance, weep, relax, or get romantic'[16], affording Veronica a level of display that might otherwise be impossible. That this scene is situated as a direct result of Veronica's belief she is about to become a social pariah allows the song to function as purgative, both for Veronica and the audience, and we are drawn further into a text which is resistant to neat conclusions in the 'messy' decisions made by the girl-protagonist.

Fiona Magowan and Louise Wrazen offer four processes of intimacy through musical engagement in their chapter "Musical Intersections, Embodiments, and Emplacements": 'mutuality (in terms of a shared sense of interdependency), belonging (as an affiliation to people and places), meaning making (through gendered, ethnic, political, national, and other identifications), and performative competency (as expressed through musical relations, skills,

and insights achieved through the course of performing)'[17]. The intimacy of Magowan and Wrazen offers multiple potential hooks for the audience of musicals, with the narrative song form ensuring that 'the inwardness of the intimate is met by a corresponding public-ness'[18]. This complexity of the public-intimate in *Heathers* is perhaps made more complex in the West End version by the ubiquity of Fletcher's camera, the behind-the-scenes access offered by her YouTube channel, and the specifics of fandom that has grown up around the musical, to which we will return later.

By the denouement of *Heathers*, the promise of the heteronormative coupling as a 'prize' has been thoroughly dismantled, and although the text still contains problematic encounters to be interrogated, it offers redemption and a 'happy ending' that does little to reinforce the primacy of romantic heterosexual love. Before the reprise of *Seventeen*, which in its first iteration is a paean to the redemptive potential of romantic love, JD blows himself up with the bomb he had intended to use at the pep rally. *Seventeen* remains a song of redemption but refigured now as an embracing of the embers of childhood, rather than a rush towards adulthood.

The friendship duet is an established sub-narrative of musical theatre; these songs often serve as a counterpoint to the more 'dramatic' material alongside which they sit. At first glance it appears as though the 'friend' in *Heathers* is going to serve as a similar narrative device, sacrificed as fodder for Veronica's ambition in both the film and musical versions. In the 1988 film the character of Martha Dunnstock is a relatively minor one, encountered in passing as the butt of a practical joke, serving to evidence Veronica's forgery skills for the

audience, and then returned to briefly in the conclusion. In contrast, in the musical version, Martha Dunnstock / Dumptruck is introduced in the number *Beautiful*.

> Martha: We on for movie night?
>
> Veronica: You're on jiffy-pop detail
>
> Martha: I rented the Princess Bride
>
> Veronica: (laughs) Again? Don't you have it memorised by now?
>
> Martha: What can I say I'm a sucker for a happy ending.[19]

This exchange is followed by some fat-shaming bullying, complete with a veiled threat of sexual violence from Kurt Kelly, star quarterback. This brief two-line exchange asserts what is beginning to emerge in the text of *Beautiful*, which is that men and boys are not to be trusted. In fairness, *Heathers* as articulated through the opening number suggests that no-one is much to be trusted; the only exception seems to be the enduring friendship of Martha and Veronica. Nevertheless, there is an interiority and a concealing that is evident even in this opening number, something which finds articulation in Berlant's distinction between 'having a life with having an intimate life'[20]. This being an adaptation of a teen movie, narratives of betrayal are pending and indeed delivered by the end of the next number, *Candy Store*. In many ways, this betrayal is stock material for the teen genre, serving to remind the audiences that '[t]eenageness is a significant 'in-between' period, and teen drama deals with the stuff of adolescent anxiety: friendship, love, sex, and impending adulthood'[21].

Heathers places female friendship as a central concern, whether to problematise the conceptualisation, or to offer it as a support system more valuable than heteronormative

coupling. Despite the fate of supporting characters, Veronica ultimately considers friendship as more sustaining than romantic love. In *Seventeen* (reprise), which serves as the closing number of *Heathers*, Veronica, following the death of JD, asks Martha if she is free:

> Veronica: (sung) Martha are you free tonight?
>
> Martha: What?
>
> Veronica: My date for the pep rally kind of blew... me off. So, I was wondering if you weren't doing anything tonight, maybe we could pop some Jiffy Pop, rent a video? Something with a happy ending?
>
> Martha: Are there any happy endings?[22]

This exchange returns us to the opening number, *Beautiful*, where Veronica teases Martha for her fondness for *The Princess Bride* (Rob Reiner, 1987), only this time seen through the prism of the death and destruction that Waters, Murphy, and O'Keefe position as analogous to the struggles of High School. By approaching Martha, not only is Veronica embracing the happy ending (albeit one that eschews romantic for platonic love), but she is also asserting the importance of understanding High School as a part of childhood as much as it is an entry into adulthood. *Seventeen (reprise)* serves as a rejection of the responsibilities that come from factionalism and empire building, and instead to embrace the irresponsibility of adolescence and living in the moment. Veronica returning to Martha reinforces the disavowal of toxic relationships for the sake of status or appearance, and foregrounds instead the value of platonic love.

In the case of *Heathers*, we are reminded both through setting (Westerburg High School) and musical numbers (*Seventeen*), that protagonists are not quite adult. Although not children per se, they occupy that strange hinterland where despite being a product of

capitalist structures, their status as child prevents them from full participation within said system. Veronica's hoped for eventual escape to an Ivy League college (referenced first in *Beautiful*), is repurposed by JD in *Freeze Your Brain* as a brief period of autonomy before marriage, and capitulation to the systems she is critical of.

Productions & Temporality

Given the period in which *Heathers'* pieces were originally conceived (the first workshop for the musical version was in 2009 and the limited Los Angeles run 2013) it is hard not to think of them as period pieces. Thus, despite the temporal distance between the original film and its musical counterpart, they appear to speak to the gender norms of a by-gone period, even if little has shifted in practice. In the interim between 2013 and the 2018 West End staging, *Time* magazine proclaimed on its May 2014 cover that Hollywood had reached the 'transgender tipping point' with Laverne Cox serving as the face of a shift in representation, and 2017 saw the emergence of the #MeToo movement in response to accusations levelled against film producer Harvey Weinstein. While these two moments serve only as flashpoints in the developing discussions around gender, they nevertheless serve to underscore the some of the issues regarding gender representation in *Heathers*. If we were to offer a critique of the musical, it would be that it uses nostalgia to avoid the problematic gender representations offered in the original text. Like other musicals based on materials developed in a similar period (we are thinking here of *Legally Blonde* [2007] and *Mean Girls* [2017]), the ideas of empowerment and self-actualisation are offered to avoid interrogating the systemic gender bias, they ultimately perpetuate.

Alternatively, these texts could be considered through the framing offered by Kristina Gottschall, Susanne Gannon, Jo Lambert, and Kelli McGraw in their essay "The Cyndi Lauper Affect: Bodies, Girlhood and Popular Culture", and understood as assemblage. In the

discussion of a memory of a seven-year-old girl watching Cyndi Lauper perform, rather than seeing the girl and the cultural object as distinct from one another, they ask:

> [w]hat if, taking up a Deleuzian sense of becoming, we see the girl body and the popular cultural image as an assemblage, an affective and fluid body that emerges as something new, something different.[23]

In so doing, they reposition conversations about subject / object, and reposition instead as assemblage. In utilising this lens, the smearing of multiple versions of Heathers meet across the temporal dislocation inherent in remakes, and blur on the bodies both of those making and those receiving the texts. The concept of the assemblage is particularly interesting in relation to Musical Theatre. As a form, it is expected that characters will be played by multiple performers. Although not unheard of, it is a rare staging that does not employ swings, and first / second covers to ensure that both the ensemble track and lead roles are covered. In some respects, any staging of a musical is a process of becoming; in long running musicals, the distance between an originator of the role and the performer being watched can often be many years / performers deep. In the case of *Les Miserables*, Carrie Hope Fletcher (the originator of Veronica in the West End staging of *Heathers*) played young Eponine, adult Eponine, and Fonteyn at varying points in her career, but originated none of these roles. She is just one of many performers who have contributed to these assemblages. In this respect, Musical Theatre differs from other forms of theatrical presentation, if simply because of this hoped for longevity. Musicals are a commercial art-form; they are intended to run through multiple casts and stagings. Thus, in *Heathers*, Veronica is not a singular instance, but a composite experienced through multiple bodies rather than by singular bodies. Audiences are complicit with the meta-textual narrative, understanding that any instance of Veronica is simply that, an instance.

Here, the idea of fandom also comes into frame within the assemblage. Like the young girl dancing to Cindi Lauper merging with the popular cultural image to become something else, Veronica merges not only with those (multiple) performers playing her, but with the audiences who invest in these portrayals. Some might bring with them the ur-Veronica of the film, others might bring the Veronica of the original West End cast recording, or the bootleg video of the off-Broadway Veronica, contributing to the 'affective and fluid body'[24] of Veronica smeared across multiple subjectivities. The online debate between Barrett Wilbert Weed and Carrie Hope Fletcher 'stans', each group arguing about who is the definitive Veronica, invoking familiar and tired tropes of body-shaming to police the 'correct' representation, served only to underscore that Veronica is not singular, and each portrayal serves only to untether the character from certainty towards a sense of becoming. It reminds us of Alice Rayner's observation that 'if words are successful in naming the ghost, there is no ghost. If the experience of the uncanny does not precede the argument about its undoing of ontology or repetitions of history, it is only an idealization'[25], which in turn takes us to Rosi Braidotti. In her book *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*, Braidotti develops the Deleuze-Guattarian concept of the Nomadic subject, which she positions as 'shifting, partial, complex and multiple'[26], moving away from a sense of singular ownership towards something borderless, mobile, and undone.

This is where the context of the West End production benefits from consideration, particularly in how fandom and social media serves to inform the construction of gender within the show, and how the concept of a pliant and complicit version of girlhood is vigorously resented, both within the text, but also through the extra-textual social media presence of the lead and her engagement in real-time with fans. Throughout the UK run of

Heathers (initially a limited engagement at The Other Palace from 9 June - 4 August 2018, which transferred for a further run at The Haymarket, 3 September - 24 November 2018), Carrie Hope Fletcher uploaded 16 vlogs to her YouTube channel[27]. Given that she was playing Veronica, this gave fans an unprecedented insight into the rehearsal and staging of the musical *Heathers*. Fletcher has been an active blogger since 2011, during which time her content has developed from teen-pranks popular with early YouTube vloggers, cover versions sang in her bedroom, to documenting her emerging career in Musical Theatre. Fletcher has a significant social media reach, achieving a score of 'B-' on socialblade.com, a score based on visibility, popularity, and cultural penetration. Her direct to camera address, and her often confessional tone, conforms to the standards of the platform which was founded on the concept of user-generated content; in the early days of YouTube, the people we watched were 'just like us'[28].

Throughout the West End-run Fletcher regularly uploaded material, serving to foreground the importance of friendship, drawing her viewers (primarily teen girls and women who have been watching her channel since their teens) and narrowing the gap between production and audience. Part of the wider shift away from the primacy of broadcast media towards a more narrowcast and on-demand engagement with media content, YouTube sees on-screen personalities take responsibility for their own content generation, with content creators in direct dialogue with subscribers. There remains a sense that YouTube vloggers are contributing to a 'user-generated' culture, even though most mainstream media outlets now have their own channels on the site. Fletcher's vlogs, first developed in the infancy of the medium, retain a sense of immediacy, and as Lee and Watkins observe this can lead to a sense of intimacy:

> PSI [para-social interaction] develops in ways like interpersonal relationships and can be a functional alternative to interpersonal relationships. Characteristics of PSI resemble interpersonal friendships—they are voluntary, provide companionship, and social attractiveness is a factor in establishing relationships. Similar to interpersonal relationships, PSI develops over time as media users reduces uncertainty and perceives similarities with a media personality.[29]

These para-social interactions, which explicitly call for the development and renegotiation of an assumed producer / consumer relationship inform the type of fandom central to YouTube, and Fletcher's hybrid celebrity status (YouTuber and West End performer), have the potential to create a double intimacy for the viewer. Her vlogs often include inducements for her followers to embrace their imperfections, to eschew normative concepts of beauty, and foreground a positive approach to mental health. In many respects, this begins to open questions of fandom which outstrip the focus of this essay. In her book *Rogue Archives* (2016), Abigail De Kosnik offers that:

> [t]hough many users consider YouTube to be something like a media archive, the platform's position on copyright means that it can-not be relied upon to protect, or keep accessible, all the content uploaded to it.[30]

In this sense, the framing of YouTube and its display means that Fletcher models a version of girlhood that tessellates with an idealised version of Veronica; imperfect, yes, but fundamentally committed to her friends. The para-social nature of the relationship, and the potential for a meta-textual reading finds articulation in the writing of Marina Gonick, who when considering the girlhood observes:

> What slowly emerges in between the gaps and interstices of voice and image, body, and landscape is the flow of potentiality, the subtle and open processes that link subjects and their social, physical, and structural milieus together in ways that may help young people negotiate the constraints of the place/space/gendered/sexed expectations of their everyday lives.[31]

Gonick's 'gaps and interstices of voice and image, body, and landscape' offers a range of responses to articulations of girlhood within contemporary cultural products, which can give account, and even permission, for contesting knowledges: those of compromise, of conformance, of discord and refusal. The pleasures of girlhood narratives in Musical Theatre can additionally invite negotiated plateaus of understanding. In his book *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (1998), Christopher Small defines the 'neglected' verb of musicking, outlining that 'to music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing, or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing'[32]. Here, he corrals a great many activities under the heading of a singular verb. Significantly, he includes 'listening' as part of the assemblage, allowing the audience a space within the active creation of a text. By understanding musicking as encounter:

> we can ask the wider and more interesting question: What does it mean when this performance (of this work) takes place at this time, in this place, with these participants? Or to put it more simply, we can ask of the performance, any performance anywhere and at any time, to ask the question What's really going on here?

Conceptually, the assemblage resists the possibility of being reduced to the sum of its parts, extended through Robin James' concept of the 'conjectural body'. Offered to qualify the linguistic clarity the term 'intersectionality' affords, James suggests that 'categories that supposedly "intersect" or "blend" never, in real life, exist in isolation from one another. Thus, every time we invoke one of these categories in isolation from the others [...] we do so conjecturally'[33]. James' concept of the conjectural body is particularly pertinent in relation to the blended performance identities that populate Musical Theatre texts: in particular, for the audiences of extended and varied articulations of girlhood, and as a structure to reposition the possibilities for constructions of gender models for teenage girls.

Endings

In many respects, the happy ending of the musical is an assemblage, drawing as it does on narrative cohesion, character beats, and the specific alchemy of internal emotional states communicated through music. In John Kenrick's *Musical Theatre: A History*, he provides a working definition of the musical, observing that '[w]hen all goes well, a musical's blend of song, dance, and the visual arts entertains, [it evokes] an intellectual as well as an emotional response'[34]. This blending to achieve coherence reminded us of a basic rule of European music theory, that to satisfy the listener, a melody needs to end on the tonic note. This sense of 'completion' allows the listener to feel as though the melody has resolved itself, a kind of sonic happy ending. Perhaps then, the happy ending of *Heathers* is as much about the assemblage brought about by musicking, as it is a pull towards the heteronormative. By leaving Veronica uncoupled but not alone, promising a kinder future which embraces the irresponsibility of childhood, and Paul and Bill remaining out and proud, we are offered

various moments of resistance in which the happy ending that Martha fears no longer exists, is instead refigured. By removing the heterosexual romantic coupling as the ultimate reward (both for the characters and the audience watching), the standard outcomes of the musical are unsettled, however gently. While *Heathers* is hardly intended or articulated as radical, it nevertheless serves as a valuable rethinking to what happiness might look like.

Endnotes:

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