



Broadway Bodies: A Critical History of Conformity

by Ryan Donovan, New York, Oxford University Press, 2023

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BOOK REVIEW

Broadway Bodies: A Critical History of Conformity, by Ryan Donovan,
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Broadway Bodies is a groundbreaking addition to the intersectional fields of fat, queer, disability, race, and performance studies, taking as its central subject the body politics of Broadway, specifically American musical theater from 1970 to the present. This well-researched volume examines casting practices, performances, and critical reception to “non-conforming bodies” – those that deviate from normative Broadway standards due to ability, gender, race, and size. The book is divided into four parts organized by subject: Broadway Bodies, Size, Sexuality, and Ability, each containing two chapters. Every section begins with relevant sociocultural context including current statistics as they relate to employment and representation within the Broadway industry. Many of the case studies reference a companion website published by Oxford that enables readers to see brief video clips of the performances under discussion, a welcome innovation for performance studies scholarship that I hope will become industry standard.

The introduction unpacks the aesthetic hierarchies of Broadway’s casting policies, noting the “fraught relationship between casting and identity” and the growing attention within the industry toward diverse and inclusive representation in relation not only to ethnicity and race but also ability, sexuality, and gender identity.¹ Donovan effectively argues that American musicals and the Broadway industry inevitably tie an actor’s employability to their appearance and their embodied identity. Moreover, Donovan establishes that casting is a labor issue and that under the auspices of typecasting (choosing actors based on appearance in conjunction with singing/dancing ability), Broadway has basically side-stepped legislated hiring policies resulting in roles being open to only a very limited number of performing bodies, thus systematically disqualifying actors based on their appearance and identity. Casting practices privilege cis-gender, white, ripped, slender bodies to the exclusion of many talented performers. Additionally, he argues, “[w]hen identities that cannot be removed are played by actors who can shed them along with their costume, casting perpetuates the power imbalance and discrimination that exist in mainstream society.”² Furthermore, “[p]erformers with non-conforming bodies face the double bind of being expected to only be able to represent their own identity and then not even being considered for those roles.”³ Chapter one, “I saw what they were hiring: casting and recasting *a chorus line*,” charts the rise of the “triple-threat” performer who must be an outstanding singer, an accomplished dancer, and an excellent actor in order to be competitive in the industry, discusses how the musical *A Chorus Line* changed the role of the ensemble and standardized the aforementioned criteria as industry standard. The hiring of triple-threat performers has subsequently had significant economic ramifications, allowing producers to hire smaller casts. The narrative of *A Chorus Line*, focusing on the true stories of individuals in the ensemble, also aptly illustrates how the performance of identity impacts storytelling and casting.

Chapter two, “*Dreamgirls*, size, and body politics,” and chapter three, “Must be heavysset” explicitly unpack how fat female bodies are stigmatized within the closed economy of the Broadway system and analyze casting practices such as terminology for casting calls and how “Broadway Musicals paradoxically normalize and stigmatize these bodies through the use of fat suits, and in reception via critical response.”⁴ Using *Dreamgirls* (1981) and *Hairspray* (2002), the only two musicals to date to call for a fat leading lady, as case studies, Donovan tracks how

critics persistently read a fat actor's character journey through the lens of her body, regardless of the script, and tend to conflate the character with the actress. For example, Jennifer Holliday (who originated the role of Effie in *Dreamgirls* with an extraordinary vocal performance) was disparaged repeatedly in critical reviews that fixated on her size and her powerful sound, offering backhanded praise of her performance with euphemistic language that simultaneously denigrated her body and voice. Life imitated art when Holliday was ultimately replaced by a slimmer performer just as her character, Effie, was. Moreover, the press consistently imbricated Holliday's alleged reputation for being "difficult" with her unruly body. "Must be Heavyset" explores the casting journey and critical reception to *Hairspray*. On the surface, *Hairspray* promotes fat positivity; but Donovan complicates this, noting that productions often used fat suits – a highly problematic practice recalling elements of blackface – on actors playing Tracy, Edna, and Maybelle and that actors' contracts included a weight clause and regular weigh-ins. Moreover, the narrative of *Hairspray* appropriates Black aesthetics as "the path to self-acceptance and cultural capital."⁵ This chapter also discusses how successfully portraying a fat character tends to haunt actresses well after the curtain has gone down, forever marking their bodies as "unstable" in normalized roles and further demonstrating how fat stigma operates both within the musical narrative as well as standardized casting practices.

Chapter four, "*La Cage aux folles* and playing gay," tracks the paradoxical history of gay characters in Broadway musicals largely written by white (frequently closeted) gay men wherein gay characters were initially depicted as campy, coded, or stereotypes and generally played by straight actors. Donovan demonstrates the economic ambivalence toward gay representation that characterized Broadway musicals for the better part of the twentieth century, in which the casting and musical narratives were more often about assimilation rather than gay pride. For example, *La Cage aux Folles* (1983) can be celebrated as a watershed moment in gay representation, centrally featuring a romantic gay relationship and drag performance just as the AIDS crisis was escalating. However, the musical's narrative foregrounds heteronormative family values, and the gay romantic leads were played by straight actors who didn't kiss onstage and assiduously downplayed the characters' gay relationship during publicity interviews, referencing it as simply a loving relationship in which they could easily substitute their feelings for their wives. Moreover, not only did the ensemble of drag performers contain no actual self-identified drag queens, but the producers insisted it include two women performers to keep the audience guessing and homogenize any sexual attraction the ensemble might incite in spectators. Chapter five, "Keeping it gay," delves into the "queer nineties," discussing the surge of theater artists coming out as gay (with some revealing their HIV status) and highlighting how "coming out" represents a labor issue in terms of how these revelations impact a performer's casting prospects. While the 1990s saw an increase in queer representation, including depictions of AIDS onstage, lesbian, bisexual, and trans representation lags with the notable exception of the landmark musical *Fun Home* (2015), which centers a lesbian protagonist.


The final section analyzes non-conforming bodies and casting practices in the context of ability and physical difference. Chapter six, "Deaf West's *awakening* on Broadway," examines how the Deaf West Theatre's production of *Spring Awakening* (2015) challenged the industry status quo by reconceiving the musical in ASL and casting deaf performers alongside hearing performers, offering "a more capacious understanding of what kinds of abilities musicals can include as they redefine what *ability* means on Broadway."⁶ While the Broadway run was not a major commercial success, in part due to competing with the blockbuster *Hamilton*, Deaf West's *Spring Awakening* offered an entirely new model of casting and interpreting musicals, raising visibility – especially through a televised Tony performance, which brought the production to a mass audience. Chapter seven, "Musicals,

physical difference, and disability,” first takes *Shrek* (2008) as an example of how “ugliness” on Broadway perpetuates the myth-based metaphor of inner beauty giving way to outer transformation and, like many musicals based on fairytales, conflates difference or disability with ugliness and evil. This chapter also discusses four musical revivals and how “musicals often stage disability and physical difference as portals to personal growth” or to serve as a contrast with other characters onstage.⁷ Moreover, Donovan problematizes the fact that the actors cast in roles in *Porgy and Bess* (2012) and *Violet* (2014), for example, did not share the character’s disability or physical difference. The chapter closes by highlighting the success of Ali Stoker, the first wheelchair user to appear on Broadway, who has achieved success and recognition in musical roles *not* designated for differently abled characters. However, Stoker currently remains the anomaly in an industry in which disability exclusion remains a structural problem.

Donovan’s epilogue reminds us there is much work to do to fully dismantle Broadway’s structural practices that uphold ableism, fatphobia, heterosexism, misogyny, and white supremacy, and to create meaningful and sustained change. Yet, the book concludes on a cautiously optimistic note, highlighting some examples of inclusive casting in regional spaces as well as drawing attention to several organizations advocating for inclusivity within the casting industry, suggesting that Broadway may be able to “change for good” if the theater community diligently persists in disrupting outdated casting tropes. *Broadway Bodies*, while eminently readable, is dense with sociopolitical context, historical research, and data surrounding casting practices. For those who study bodies in representation, specifically in the context of performance, this volume is a welcome contribution and is certain to serve as an anchor in this growing field.

Notes

1. Introduction, 6.
2. *Ibid.*, 26.
3. *Ibid.*, 11.
4. Donovan, 63.
5. *Ibid.*, 112.
6. Donovan, 180.
7. *Ibid.*, 224.

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