

# **The role of literature in musical theatre: Rethinking local identities via a global genre in *The Peasants*<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

Musical theatre, from its beginnings, crosses artistic and literary boundaries, transforming novels (and other genres) into an experience that is a synthesis of the arts. The first part of the article explores how musicals reinterpret literary narratives, merging text, music, and movement to expand the possibilities of self-expression. The main part focuses on *The Peasants* (*Chłopi*), a musical adaptation directed by Wojciech Kościelniak (Gdynia, 2013), based on Władysław Reymont's Nobel Prize-winning novel. Through a comparative analysis I examine how Kościelniak reimagines a rural, turn-of-the-century Polish narrative in the language of a global genre, musical theatre. This adaptation illustrates how the musical form transforms the themes and emotional registers of the novel, offering new interpretations while maintaining deep ties to its literary origins. As part of a wider trend of literary adaptations in Polish musical theatre *The Peasants* is an example of revitalising both tradition and universal storytelling.

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**Keywords**

Polish musical theatre, national identity, literary adaptation, Wojciech Kościelniak, *Chłopi*

**Rola literatury w musicalu:  
O lokalnej tożsamości w kontekście globalnego gatunku  
na przykładzie *Chłopów***

**Abstrakt**

Teatr muzyczny od swoich początków przekracza artystyczne i literackie granice, przekształcając powieść (i inne gatunki) w spektakl będący syntezą sztuk. Pierwsza część artykułu stanowi prezentację tego, w jaki sposób musicale reinterpretują literaturę, łącząc tekst, muzykę i ruch, aby poszerzyć możliwości ekspresji. Główna część skupia się zaś na musicalowej adaptacji *Chłopów*, w reżyserii Wojciecha Kościelniaka (Gdynia, 2013), opartej na nagrodzonej Nagrodą Nobla powieści Władysława Reymonta. Poprzez analizę porównawczą rozważam, w jaki sposób Kościelniak prezentuje polską narrację o wiejskim życiu z przełomu wieków w języku globalnego gatunku, jakim jest musical. Adaptacja jest przykładem tego, w jaki sposób ta teatralna forma muzyczna przekształca tematy i rejestry emocjonalne powieści, oferując nową interpretację przy jednoczesnym zachowaniu głębokich powiązań z jej literackimi korzeniami. Wpisując się w szerszy trend adaptacji literackich w polskim teatrze muzycznym, *Chłopi* stanowią przykład ożywienia zarówno tradycji, jak i uniwersalnego sposobu opowiadania historii.

**Słowa kluczowe**

polski musical, tożsamość narodowa, adaptacja literatury, Wojciech Kościelniak, *Chłopi*

**1. Introduction**

Almost 20 years ago, Raymond Knapp published *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (2006), in which

he – among other topics – discussed American identity and national mythologies imprinted on the genre. Although the musical was conceived in the United States and many of its most important productions are so strongly related to this country, the form is widely used all over the world, including in Poland. While working on my Ph.D. thesis on the repertoire of Polish musical theatres, I found out that in the last 30 years, over 1500 various shows have been staged in 15 musical theatres in Poland. Almost half of them were original Polish productions. Significantly, over 20% of the productions staged in Poland over the last three decades in musical theatres have been adaptations of literature.<sup>2</sup>

One of the longest-running musicals in Poland is *The Peasants* (*Chłopi*), based on the novel of the same name by Władysław Reymont. It premiered on 6 September 2013 at the Danuta Baduszkowa Musical Theatre in Gdynia.<sup>3</sup> It was directed by the author of the adaptation, Wojciech Kościelniak, who is probably the most important director of Polish musical theatre living today. He has developed his own theatrical language, calling it “the third way” – it is situated between American musical and operetta or dramatic theatre (Wester 2009, Sobierski 2018: 180).

The subtitle of *The Peasants* on the theatre’s website stresses it is a “musical about our identity” and for that reason I decided to examine the identities presented on stage. My research aims to discuss the following questions:

- What does the novel bring to Kościelniak’s musical and how does his musical contextualise Reymont’s novel in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

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<sup>2</sup> The research has not yet been published.

<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to note that the theatre’s patron, the renowned manager, director and reformer Danuta Baduszkowa, had planned to stage the novel in Gdynia during the 1970s (Baduszkowa 1973: 18). She did not create the piece on her favoured stage, but instead directed it in the Teatr Wielki in Warsaw (Krawczykowski 1974).

- Why did a theatre maker from Poland choose a global genre to tell a local story?
- What type of community is being portrayed on the stage?

## 2. Literature in musical theatre

From its beginnings, literature has been an important source of inspiration for musical theatre. While we may debate whether *The Black Crook* or *Show Boat* was the first musical,<sup>4</sup> we cannot deny that both were heavily influenced by previous literary works. The former premiered on Broadway in 1866<sup>5</sup> and although was not based on a specific literary work, it drew on familiar tropes and themes from European melodrama and fairy tales.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, many popular songs from that period were incorporated into the show. It is important to acknowledge that the integration of songs from various productions was a natural practice in the early history of musical theatre. The second production referred to, *Show Boat*, premiered on Broadway in 1927<sup>7</sup> and was an adaptation of Edna Ferber's novel of the same name. The work has been the subject of discussion among historians of the genre due to its innovative nature: it was "a show that blended the integration of operetta with the unabashed spirit of musical comedy" (Kenrick 2008: 203). This development signifies a transition from shows in which the dances and songs were not stylistically coherent with the plot – as exemplified by *The Black Crook* – to a more integrated style. The narrative also

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<sup>4</sup> We could also include other titles in this debate, such as *Little Johnny Jones* or *The Beggar's Opera* (Preston 2017: 21), view *The Black Crook* as a symbol, being fully aware that the title of the first is not accurate (Knapp 2006: 20-29; Reside 2011), or simply conclude that it is not so easy to name the first musical with absolute certainty (Kenrick 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Music and lyrics: miscellaneous writers, book: Charles M. Barras.

<sup>6</sup> Barras was inspired by Carl Maria von Weber's opera *Der Freischütz* (*The Freeshooter*) (Knapp 2006: 20), when Weber and his librettist Friedrich Kind based their work on a Johann August Apel's novella *Der Freischütz: eine Volkssage* (*The Freeshooter: A Folk Tale*) (Kamiński 2015: 1778).

<sup>7</sup> Music: Jerome Kern, book and lyrics: Oscar Hammerstein II.

engaged with significant themes, including racism, interracial marriage, and generational conflict.

The same can be said of the musical, which is a symbol of another significant step in the history of the genre: the creation of the integrated musical<sup>8</sup> – *Oklahoma!* premiering in 1943.<sup>9</sup> It was an adaptation of Lynn Riggs's play *Green Grow the Lilacs* from 1930. This is a particularly interesting case study because the literary source was read by the authors of the musical in a way that was almost entirely different from the original meaning.

[...] Lynn Riggs, the author of *Green Grow the Lilacs*, was himself part Cherokee, and wrote the play as a nostalgic account of a time he had lived through. Yet, despite the fact that in Riggs's play (which takes place, specifically, in Indian Territory, not Oklahoma Territory), many of the characters claim Indian heritage and defiantly assert their separateness from the United States, this dimension has been completely effaced in *Oklahoma!*, where there is not a single Indian to be seen, and where joining the Union is joyfully anticipated by all. The extended parallel can only be imagined as part of an alternate history following a projected Nazi victory in World War II: thus, we might imagine, in a fully Germanized Europe some thirty years later, a Pole born around mid-century on a "reservation" somewhere in the former Poland writes a play that recreates nostalgically a past era, which is then converted into a musical that celebrates the emergent German community overcoming its petty internal conflicts and assuming its place as a full-fledged "state" of the German Reich – to be performed in Berlin or Leipzig for an audience who had managed to forget that Poland had once belonged to someone else and that its very name announced that fact. (Knapp, 2006: 125–126).

It is important to acknowledge that the show was written and composed in the 1940s, at a time when artists' perspectives and

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<sup>8</sup> An integrated musical is a genre of modern theatre in which music, songs, choreography and dialogue are intricately interwoven to create a cohesive storytelling experience and to shape the characters.

<sup>9</sup> Music: Richard Rodgers, lyrics and book: Oscar Hammerstein II.

sensibilities differed significantly from those in the present day. However, when assessed from a contemporary standpoint, it could be argued that, while being inspired by literature, they engaged with it in a manner that diverged from the author's original intention for the text. It is also noteworthy that *Okla-homa!* is never omitted when the history of musicals is discussed, yet this significant shift in the concept of an adapted novel is seldom referenced. This is most likely due to the fact that the objective of the authors was to demonstrate how a robust nation can be established through the collaboration of distinct groups. The topic was of significance to the American audience, particularly in light of the United States' entry into the Second World War at that point. By omitting the aforementioned aspect of the plot, the focus is directed towards the consolidation of American society.

It is not solely the case that the earliest musicals were the subject of significant literary influence. To illustrate this point, one may consider the numerous productions that have been inspired by William Shakespeare's works. *Kiss Me, Kate* (1948)<sup>10</sup> is a musical that features actors performing *The Taming of the Shrew*, thereby combining tensions that occur both onstage and offstage, which mirror the conflicts present in Shakespeare's play. Another example is *West Side Story* that premiered nine years later.<sup>11</sup> On this occasion, musical theatre adapts *Romeo and Juliet*, transferring the setting to 1950s New York. In place of the Montagues and Capulets, rival street gangs, the Jets and the Sharks, are introduced. Regrettably, due to limitations of space, only two (more contemporary this time) examples can be recalled here. *Something Rotten* (2015)<sup>12</sup> is a comedy set in Shakespeare's time about the invention of the musical with numerous references made to the renowned poet from Stratford.

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<sup>10</sup> Music and lyrics: Cole Porter, book: Bella Spewack and Samuel Spewack.

<sup>11</sup> Music: Leonard Bernstein, lyrics: Stephen Sondheim, book: Arthur Laurents.

<sup>12</sup> Music and lyrics: Wayne Kirkpatrick and Karey Kirkpatrick.

Finally, we turn to & *Juliet* (2019),<sup>13</sup> a jukebox musical<sup>14</sup> that imagines what would have happened if Juliet had not died. The production is a feminist and comedic reinterpretation of the play, incorporating popular music.

The musicals discussed above represent merely a small fraction of the extensive body of correlations that exist between literature and musical theatre. It is evident that a diverse range of adaptations, originating not only from literary sources but also from cinematic productions, have the potential to serve as a dependable income stream for producers. In light of the escalating costs of musical productions over the past few decades, it is crucial that creators make deliberate decisions. Turning to a well-known story can provide a certain degree of assurance that the audience will be interested in the new version of the narrative with which they are already familiar.

### **3. *The Peasants* – first a novel**

In 1924 – just 6 years after Poland regained its independence – the author of *The Peasants*, Władysław Reymont, was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. The novel quickly became part of the school curriculum in Poland. With respect to its depiction of national identity, it is important to understand that Poland has found itself in the middle of European conflicts for centuries and for a 123-year period it was under partition and not recognised as a state. Therefore, a short introduction to the context of the novel may be of some relevance.

*The Peasants* was published in fragments in a weekly magazine between 1902 and 1908. Although the author does not clearly state the time of the action, it can be estimated that it

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<sup>13</sup> Book: David West Read, songs: Max Martin.

<sup>14</sup> A jukebox musical is a production that uses pre-existing songs. The score is not original, but rather adapts popular songs into a new narrative. At times, it has been used to tell a story about a famous band or singer, but at other times, it has been employed to compose an entirely new narrative, as is the case with one of the most famous jukebox musicals, *Mamma Mia!* (1999).

takes place between 1883 and 1884 (Ziejka 1999: LXXXII). Poland disappeared from maps in 1795, having been partitioned between Prussia, Russia and Austria. Even before that, the peasantry was the largest, poorest and worst treated group in the country. Serfdom had forced them for centuries to work hard for the landowners. The law did not protect them, and the nobility could do as they pleased, overworking them, beating them, and even treating them as sub-human and not worthy of any respect.<sup>15</sup> Years of hunger and humiliation led to growing anger. During the partition, in times of national uprisings, the peasantry refused to support the nobility and to take part in the fight for independence of Poland. It has been argued that the division between the peasantry and the nobility and the lack of communication between the groups, were key reasons for the failure of the national uprisings (Ziejka 1999: VIII, XX).

This situation worked in favour of the partitioners, because by abolishing serfdom they won the favour of the largest social group of Poles. The identity of the peasants was not easy to define. They spoke Polish, some of them felt that they belonged to Poland, but at the same time they knew that this nation was not helping them and that its nobility was mostly oppressing them (Gołębiowski 2018, Ziejka 1999: XX–XXI).

In the second half of the 19th century, however, Polish peasants became legitimate citizens. In the Russian Partition (where the story of *The Peasants* is set), serfdom was fully abolished in 1864. As Franciszek Ziejka (1999: XXII) puts it: “with difficulty, but persistently, [...] the peasants began to get rid of [...] their serfdom, their enslaved soul. Slowly, but diligently, they regained the dignity of free men”. It was at this time that poets and writers began to observe this group more closely. It is said that the symbolic culmination and conclusion of this process was the printing of *The Peasants*, which explains the prominence of the novel within the Polish culture (Ziejka 1999: XIV).

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<sup>15</sup> The reality of life for Polish peasants is vividly and candidly depicted, for example, in the book *Chamstwo* by Kacper Pobłocki (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2022).



Reymont himself was not a peasant but was born in a village in a rather modest household. In *The Peasants* he tried to describe the culture, worldview, strengths and weaknesses of an entire social group. He focused on one village, and within that village on one family, and he does so cleverly. By choosing one of the richest families of the village, he can show all their relationships: with the richest and with the poorest, from officials and priests to beggars and wanderers (Ziejka 1999: XLII).

The peasants' lives are closely linked to nature, which guides their work throughout the year and provides them with food, so – in structural terms – the novel is rooted in the natural calendar and is divided into four parts reflective of the seasons. There is a peculiar love story that is central to the plot. Maciej Boryna – the protagonist – is the richest landlord in the Lipce village. He wants to get married for the third time to Jagna, the most beautiful girl in the village. The novel begins in autumn, with a proposal and wedding. Boryna's children, who are already grown up and have their own families, want to become independent and are waiting for when Boryna gives them their share of land. The situation is made worse when Boryna bequeaths some of his land to his new wife but does not do the same for his children. It does not help that Antek, Boryna's eldest son, is in love with Jagna. Jagna is also involved in an affair with the village mayor and the young cleric. After Boryna's death in spring, the story begins to move quickly. It ends in the summer, when the cleric's mother incites the villagers against Jagna, who is considered sinful and poisonous. The whole village comes together to punish and exile her, throwing her on their local dung heap.

#### **4. Second – the musical**

Now that the historical and literary context of the novel has been explored, the following study will consider the ways in which the novel is represented in the musical. Because of the social group portrayed, we hear what is termed “a white voice”, coming from

the stage of the theatre. The term “white voice” (alternatively called “archaic”, “traditional” or “singing-shouting”) refers to a traditional vocalisation technique used in Central and Eastern Europe, particularly in rural areas, for the singing of folk songs. It is most commonly associated with a technique that is based on natural breathing and sound production (thus avoiding vocal fatigue), with the nose and teeth primarily functioning as resonators. The voice produced in this manner is characterised by its loudness, density and openness. Despite the challenges in providing a precise definition and the wide array of characteristics that contribute to its diversity (including regional and linguistic influences, such as dialects and accents), the *bel canto* style is frequently positioned in contrast to it (Grozdeu-Kolańska 2019, Koczurko and Kowalkowska 2022).

In the past, the village was used as a theme in Polish operas. Traditional costumes were used, folk traditions were depicted, and even local dialects and melodies were incorporated into the stories. However, everything was sung in a classical or *bel canto* vocal style. *The Peasants* seems to have been the first successful and well-known production in which white singing (mixed with other vocal techniques) completes the picture of the Polish village.

The existence of the white voice and a culture of singing in the Polish countryside justify the use of musical theatre to tell this story. In a significant number of cases, the sources for an adaptation are the novels that already have the music in them. *The Peasants* has music in it, because the Polish village was full of music. Many traditions were connected with singing. In the novel and on stage we see both secular and Christian traditions (intriguingly, some of them have clear pre-Christian roots). More than a quarter of the songs in the musical are diegetic: the characters on stage sing while praying, while dancing in the tavern, during all the traditions connected with marriage, and during some household chores, not to mention fragments of Christmas carols. For example, the scene of a wedding reception lasts for more than 10 minutes and is filled with music and various

traditional songs. It is interesting to note that these scenes, filled with diegetic music, have also featured in the previous film adaptation of the novel (1973), as well as in the most recent adaptation (2023).<sup>16</sup>

Since music-filled traditions and rituals naturally form a musical narrative, it seems reasonable to complete the story with typical songs of musical theatre. In this way, the story becomes a kind of parable that takes place in a semi-unreal but very authentic space. Thanks to the coherence of melody, singing style and themes, it seems as if the characters simply communicate in this way, experiencing various events through singing together.

### **5. Third – a source of inspiration**

The subsequent sections will address the question of how the musical genre broadens our understanding of the novel. The purpose of this analysis is to identify and examine two aspects of the novel that, while present within the text, become more visible (in a literal sense) on stage.

Firstly, the piece incorporates a doubled Greek-style chorus. There is a visually impaired wanderer who enters the village in the first scene and leaves it in the last. He sits in the corner of the stage throughout, commenting now and then on the action. His commentary is metaphorical and philosophical, as if he were communicating only through proverbs. Then we have a small guardian angel character, who is neither glorious nor extraordinary. It has a dirty face and ragged clothes and follows the villagers, observing their joyful and sorrowful moments. It is very involved with their emotions, but it cannot really help them.

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<sup>16</sup> The entire musical is available for viewing via VOD TVP website (2014), and the album is likewise accessible on various streaming platforms (Spotify 2022). In order to gain an understanding of the manner in which the white voice is articulated in both the ensemble and the solo song, it is recommended to listen to *Cicho... sennie... jesienne* ('Quiet... dreamy... autumnal') and *Ja bym chciała kiej dziedziczka* ('I would like, like an heiress').

Interactions between the angel and other characters are very limited. It sings a song with the two characters who are orphaned. However, given that the action is set in a lyrical time and space, it is rather unclear whether this can be considered an actual interaction. The second instance occurs right before Boryna's death, when the angel assists him in putting on his shoes and leaving the house to sow grain for the last time. Because of these characters, who are on the verge of realism and other worlds, we can once again see the story from a different perspective. It is not just a story about Boryna, his children and Jagna. It is a parable that can be read in many ways (more on that later).

Secondly, in visual terms, the community is literally brought together through choreography. There are a lot of group scenes where the whole of the village community is gathered in one place. Whenever something important occurs for the community, they sing about it together. When Boryna is about to ask Jagna to marry him, a chain of people passing on the gossip via song is formed. When they go to defend their forest from the authorities, they sing together to raise their spirits. The musical also starts with the village's community bound in a circle. Jagna is the only person who separates herself from the group. She proceeds to dance around them, inviting multiple men to join her (one by one), while the rest of the villagers form a closed group, exhibiting clear divisions between men and women who stand separately. This choreography enables the audience to concentrate on the frictions between Jagna and the community she is part of from the very beginning.

This visual representation of this community helps us to see it as another character that can be precisely defined. It is strong, lion-hearted and tradition-bound, but at the same time ruthless and prone to manipulation. It is also inescapable, because it is everywhere. Traditions that they follow are of great value but, cultivated without reflection, they can exclude some members of the community. They are also a dangerous tool in the hands of people who can use them for their own ends. This is what

happened to Jagna. She was different from the beginning. She is part of a community, but she does not follow all the rules, she follows her natural urge for love, and she cannot help falling in love with men. It is important to add that some of them take advantage of her open nature and force her to be with them. When she crosses the line and starts spending time with a young cleric, it does not take long for his mother to turn the whole village against Jagna. When Jagna is banished from the village, the community sings:

WÓJTOWA [śpiewa – MW]:  
 Na te wieś spadnie nam Boża  
 kara  
 Jak na Sodomę z Gomorą!  
 Kiej ta piekielnica...poczwara  
 Zgorszeniem będzie i zmorą!  
 Toć nigdy nam Bóg nie wybaczy!  
 Nie odkładajmy na potem!  
 Tak niech już ten pomiot  
 sobaczy  
 Zdechnie kiej świnia pod  
 płotem!

WÓJTOWA [mówi – MW]:  
 Związać ją!

CHÓR [śpiewa – MW]:  
 Za krzywdy dzieci, matek i żon!  
 Kijami zatłuc! A ścierwo psom!

MAYOR'S WIFE [sings – MW]:  
 God's punishment will fall on  
 this village  
 As on Sodom and Gomorrah!  
 As this infernal... hideous  
 creature  
 Shall be a mischief and  
 a nightmare!  
 God will never forgive us!  
 Let us not postpone!  
 So let this monster see  
 And die like a pig under a fence!

MAYOR'S WIFE [says – MW]:  
 Tie her up!

CHOIR [sings – MW]:  
 For the harm of children,  
 mothers and wives!  
 Beat her with sticks and give  
 the scum to dogs!

(Kościelniak and Dziwisz 2013, translated by Małgorzata Woźniak)

It is quite terrifying to realise that we can hear echoes of this reasoning used today around the world. Protecting the family, fighting in the name of gods and other similar claims are used today to fight against minorities, to ban people from entering the

country and to exclude any problematic otherness from everyday life.

It is important to remember that, in the past, the exclusion from the village was one of the worst punishments. Such societies were more insular, and the notion of easily relocating one's life to a new place was less commonly practised (especially among unmarried women). Moreover, within the social structure of small communities, such as the one depicted in the novel and on stage, people were dependent on one another. Consequently, their perception by the rest of the villagers was a significant factor in their overall wellbeing. "The characters of the musical followed simple laws – if you are not with us, you are against us. The weak or others had no chance of survival" (Zajac-Kiedysz 2015: 294).

## **6. Fourth – a multifaceted story**

Traditions are important and they bring people together in difficult times, but they cannot be used to justify doing harm to others. Of course, this is not the only issue worth exploring: there are conflicts between social classes (the fight over the forest between the peasants and the nobility), between generations (Boryna's children and their quest for self-reliance) and between genders (the patriarchal norms that condemn Jagna over all the men who cheated on their wives with her). It is a universal story by a great writer, brought to life in a popular style of musical theatre. The audiences can focus on the gripping story of fully developed characters, analyse the characteristics of the community, or see it as a parable about life, nature and prejudice.

It is also important to reflect on the national identity portrayed in this production through the representation of the peasantry. An identity of hard-working people who cherish their traditions, who draw their strength from the community and who fearlessly fight for their freedom and rights. But they are people with weaknesses and that means that there are parts of

the story that should be admired, and others that should serve as a warning.

Some of the traditions shown on stage, born between church and nature, are still present in the Polish culture. The history of the peasants is really *our* history as Poles; it is *our* identity, because most of us who live in Poland today do not come from castles, townhouses and manor houses, but from the country cottages (Wasilewski 1986, Gołębiowski 2018). This musical, which has been in the repertoire of the Musical Theatre in Gdynia for 12 years, is a voice in the ongoing discussion about looking at our past through the eyes of the less fortunate, those who have been overlooked by history, and those who are in fact our forefathers and foremothers.

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