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Pigs May Fly: how Julie Andrews helped me fall in love with irrational public actions and objects

By: Laurel Beckman

Introduction

Pigs May Fly is an experimental text that playfully engages the complex attitudes and reception of art in the public sphere, particularly urban-based relational practice. A genre-busting interdisciplinary text, *Pigs May Fly* employs the structure and experience of musical theater and film in affectionate critique of the appropriate, rational agendas in public art.

The politics of public art are rooted in appropriateness of production to site and audience. By design such appropriateness assumes a set of criteria and conditions of location, demographics, and comprehension. Although public art projects are met by both known and unknown viewers/participants/conditions, current practice is frequently, if counter-intuitively, driven by a sense of political correctness or goodness. In this case, good intentions can substitute for rich meaning and messy affect.

The act of reading engages the visual and aural. We see and hear as we pace out rhythms in the text. Designed to perform its meaning, *Pigs May Fly* takes advantage of the inherent musicality of reading in its use of popular musical scores from 4 productions associated with actress/singer Julie Andrews. Readers sing along to the mash-up of theater and film iterations of *My Fair Lady*, *The Sound of Music*, and *Mary Poppins*. Additionally, home-grown YouTube videos of the songs are included as sing-along links. *Pigs May Fly*

celebrates and prompts the idiosyncratic and irrational affect in reading, singing, and public art.

The place is Los Angeles, the time is now.

Scene 1: Outside and below the Museum of Contemporary Art and California Plaza, where an out-of-doors exhibition of new public-space arts has just premiered.

Time: After opening reception, a cool late evening.

At Rise: The reception is over. Smartly gowned, beautifully of-the-moment Angelenos are pouring up from the subterranean exhibits. Many attendees are wearing souvenir GPS chips. Some huddle together under the overpass, or over the underpass, which is partially in view on one side of the stage. On the opposite side, there is smudge-pot fire around which a quartet of greasy street vendors is warming themselves. Calls of "taxi!" punctuate the air.

Three street entertainers rush to perform a few acrobatic, suggestive dance steps and tricks. They are dressed in well-worn costumes of a bear, a tiger, and a duck. They detain the crowd for a moment with their excited cries and encouragement of participation. The female member of the trio, the raggedy tiger, passes the hat as her two associates continue and reach the crazed climax of their act.

Mrs. Eynsford-Hill, a middle-aged lady in evening dress and her son, Laurel, a young man of twenty, also in evening attire, come through the crowd in search of a taxi. One of the street vendors collides into him. He is thrown backwards and hits a figure hidden behind a group of people who now come flying forward as he lands in a slippery heap. She is a flower girl, Julie. Her basket of flowers has been knocked from her hands, her violets scattered about. She is not at all an attractive person, resembling more a pig than a girl. She is perhaps eighteen, perhaps twenty. She wears a little sailor hat made of straw that has long been exposed to the elements of downtown LA. Her hair needs washing, she wears a dirty blouse with coarse pants, and she needs the services of a dentist.

Appearing in the crowd is one Prof. Higgins and his man-servant, Pickering, waiting for their car. Higgins, the former headmaster of a prominent prep-school, recognizes the dirty flower girl as one of his failed former charges, and calls out to her as she runs away.

JULIE
Aaaaooowww! W-ee w-ee!

LAUREL
(Clumsily trying to help her, speaking) I'm frightfully sorry.

JULIE
(speaking) Two bunches of violets ruined on the sidewalk! A full day's wages. Why don't you look where you're going?!

MRS. EYNSFORD-HILL
(speaking) Get a taxi, Laurel. Do you want me to catch pneumonia or something worse from these creatures?

LAUREL
(speaking) I'm sorry, mother, I'll get a taxi right away. (To Julie) Sorry. (He goes)

PROF. HIGGINS
(calling out) Wait, girl, come back here....

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A7B0dN8s8uw>

What in all of heaven could've prompted her to go,

After such a triumph as the ball?
What could've depressed her;
What could've possessed her?
I cannot understand the wretch at all.

Women are irrational, that's all there is to that!
Their heads are full of cotton, hay, and rags!
They're nothing but exasperating, irritating,
vacillating, calculating, agitating,
Maddening and infuriating hags!

[To Pickering]

Pickering, why can't a woman be more like a man?

PICKERING

I beg your pardon?

PROF. HIGGINS

Yes...

Why can't a woman be more like a man?
Men are so honest, so thoroughly square;
Eternally noble, historic'ly fair;
Who, when you win, will always give your back a pat.
Well, why can't a woman be like that?

Scene 2: Exterior. Day. Helicopter shot.

Time: The following day. Morning.

At Rise: The screen glows an eerie blue, then fills with swirling white mists. We fly through the misty cloud and emerge over a craggy metropolis.

The massive, forbidding grid stretches to the horizon then disappears behind more dense mist. The white fog gives way to silky sheets of steel, concrete and glass. We fly over a sheer concrete face. Hundreds of feet below a river runs through an asphalt valley like a glistening blue ribbon. The impossibly high skyscrapers give way to gently rolling streets.

Birds whistle. We fly out from behind a hillside and over a ragtag cluster of modest shelters, glittering in the brightening sunshine. MUSIC sneaks in. We fly toward a sunny spot where a young woman with short blonde hair strolls down the river embankment, swinging her arms in a carefree stride. She wears sensible black shoes and stockings and a gray smocked apron over a black dress. Her name is Julie. As we close in on her rapidly, she spreads her arms and twirls, for no apparent reason, in a joyful spin.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rZJF9vTCw4Y&feature=related>

JULIE

The hills are alive
With the sound of music
With songs they have sung
For a thousand years

The hills fill my heart
With the sound of music
My heart wants to sing ev'ry song it hears

My heart wants to beat like the wings of the birds
That rise from the lake to the trees
My heart wants to sigh like a chime that flies
From a church on a breeze

To laugh like a brook when it trips and falls

Over stones on its way
To sing through the night
Like a lark who is learning to pray

I go to the hills
When my heart is lonely
I know I will hear
What I've heard before

My heart will be blessed
With the sound of music
And I'll sing once more

Scene 3: Low-rent section just west of the east side, near the Los Angeles river.

Time: A few days later. Mid-week. Mid-morning.

At Rise: Fade in. An improvised community along the banks of the LA river. River and city debris is strewn about everywhere, intermingled with stubborn plants. A canopy of blue tarps gives shape to living spaces of tents, recuperated furniture and still useful appliances. A wild chicken struts about. In the distance sirens blare and frogs croak. Dressed in lightly layered tattered clothing, a few denizens- Julie, the flower girl, along with Bert, Jane, Michael, and Mrs. Corry, take a walk.

A slow walk-and-talk tracking shot follows Julie and friends engaged in conversation as they meander down an asphalt path. A river trickles below. Bicyclists and truants populate the scene. On the periphery, funky chain-link fences reveal backyard plots with vegetable beds, barking dogs, and old toys. The walkers pass and give greetings to volunteers tending the local garden co-op patch.

As they continue walking, Bert picks up a stick, using it alternately as a cane and a pointer. One by one, each walker picks up an object from the ground, palms then places it in their bulging pockets. One of the truants throws a rock at them. Mrs. Corry picks it up and puts it in her pocket.

Dolly zoom shot. A little further down the path, the walkers encounter an arranged collection of materials that could be described as a kinetic assemblage. Although thoroughly delighted, they have no explanation of what it is or how it got there. Whirling about it on all fours, Julie hazards a guess.

BERT
(pointing, speaking to Julie) Tell them what it is.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fhEm75ABRHQ&feature=related>

JULIE
Super... calif... ragilistic... expialid... ocious! Oh!

MICHAEL
That's not a word!

JULIE
(speaking) Of course it's a word. And unless I'm very much mistaken, I think it's going to prove a rather useful one.

When trying to express oneself, it's frankly quite absurd
To leaf through lengthy lexicons, to find the perfect word.
A little spontaneity keeps conversation keen
You need to find a way to say precisely what you mean.
Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious

Even though the sound of it is simply quite atrocious
If you say it loud enough, you'll always sound precocious
Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious
Um diddle um diddle um diddle ay
Um diddle um diddle um diddle ay

JANE
(speaking) But it doesn't mean anything!

JULIE
(speaking) It can mean precisely what you want it to!
When stone-age men were chatting, simply grunting would suffice.

BERT
Though if they'd heard this word, they might have used it once or twice.

JULIE
(speaking) That's right.

MRS. CORRY
I'm sure Egyptian pharaohs would have grasped it in a jiff.
Then every single pyramid would bear this hieroglyph! Oh!
Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious
Say it and wild animals would not seem so ferocious

JULIE
Add some further flourishes, it's so

MRS. CORRY
Ahhh

JULIE
Ahhhh

BERT
Ah-ah-ah-ah.

ALL
Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious!
Um diddle um diddle um diddle ay
Um diddle um diddle um diddle ay
Um diddle um diddle um diddle ay
Um diddle um diddle um diddle ay

BERT
The Druids could have carved it on their mighty monoliths

MRS. CORRY
The ancient Greeks, I'm certain, could have used it in their myths.

JULIE
I'm sure the Roman Empire only entered the abyss
Because those Latin scholars never had a word like this!
Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious!

If you say it softly, the effect can be hypnoticous.

BERT
Check your breath before you speak, in case it's halitotious

JULIE
(speaking) Oh, Bert.

ALL
Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious!
Um diddle um diddle um diddle ay
Um diddle um diddle um diddle ay
Um diddle um diddle um diddle ay
Um diddle um diddle um diddle ay!

Scene 4: Outside and on a crowded sidewalk near Olvera Street, not far from the county jail, the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, the Geffen Contemporary and Union Station.

Time: Later that day. A warm early afternoon.

At Rise: A bright light washes the street between buildings on either side of the stage. Cars and taxis swoosh by pedestrians, businesses. On one side of the stage a small plaza contains benches surrounding a sculpture. The benches, artworks themselves, are fitted with motion-to-audio sensors that emit a sigh every time someone sits down or gets up. In unison, the weekday lunch crowd rises from the benches, rushing back to work. An empty plastic bag blows up the street. Lunch trucks, food carts; vendors offering flowers, newspapers, and drugs animate the colorful and aromatic streets. Surrounding surfaces are adorned with street writing, stickers, stencils and wheat-pasted posters.

Amongst the assorted graffiti, an odd mini-mural of unknown origin and intent. It may be an elaborate poster, or a street painting. Homely and lacking any obvious message, the unusual presentation is none-the-less appealing to many passers-by. On close inspection we can see that it's thoughtfully made and surprises with a broken spoon glued on and protruding from its surface, as well as the block letter "J" smeared in the lower right corner.

On his way back to work Laurel's sightline falls upon and draws him to the unexpected work, as he contemplates taking or filling the bowl of the broken spoon.

LAUREL
(speaking quietly to himself) I'll just leave it alone there, good as it is.

Scene 5: Industrial section east of the Los Angeles river.

Time: Later that day. Dusk. Balmy.

At Rise: Partial street and a full sidewalk span the stage. There are storefronts, a curb, streetlamps, minimal debris. Laurel, wearing nice shoes and a hat, is walking home from work. He walks around a prominent sign that reads "Urban Intervention" and continues towards the scenic route paralleling the LA river. He sees and recognizes the flower pig-girl from the other night after the opening. He is excited to see her. Julie, wearing a faded print dress, recognizes Laurel. They exchange glances and increasingly animated grunts. Nighttime drops, the sky darkens, streetlamps and storefronts light up. A mysterious D.I.Y. projection can be seen on the front of a building. Illuminated under a streetlamp, Laurel and Julie in conversation. We learn that they both have recently moved to the area, and are practically neighbors. They exchange stories about their short histories in the city from the past year, last week, and earlier that day. Curious about each others backgrounds, the conversation turns to the antics of their respective and kooky kin back home.

They continue walking when, abruptly, they arrive at Julie's modest shelter, she bids farewell and goes in, leaving Laurel alone outside on the improvised stoop.

LAUREL

When she mentioned how her aunt bit off the spoon,
She completely done me in.
And my heart went on a journey to the moon,
When she told about her father and the gin.
And I never saw a more enchanting farce
Than that moment when she shouted
"move your bloomin' "....

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TVMWJwTx-go>

I have often walked down this street before;
But the pavement always stayed beneath my feet before.
All at once am I
Several stories high.
Knowing I'm on the street where you live.

Are there lilac trees in the heart of town?
Can you hear a lark in any other part of town?
Does enchantment pour
Out of ev'ry door?
No, it's just on the street where you live!

And oh! The towering feeling
Just to know somehow you are near.
The overpowering feeling
That any second you may suddenly appear!
People stop and stare. They don't bother me.
For there's nowhere else on earth that I would rather be.
Let the time go by, I won't care if I
Can be here on the street where you live.

Laurel, hopeful and full, walks down the street a bit. Facing down-stage, he pauses and leans against a nearby post. Fade to black.

A speculative mash-note with acknowledgements and apologies to: Julie Andrews, George Bernard Shaw, P. L. Travers, and,

Alan Jay Lerner (book and lyrics) and Frederick Loewe (music), *My Fair Lady*, debuting on Broadway with Julie Andrews in 1956; based on George Bernard Shaw's 1913 play, *Pygmalion: A Romance in Five Acts*. The film musical adaptation, directed by George Cukor, was released in 1964, with Alan Lerner (script), Lerner and Loewe (lyrics and music), starring Audrey Hepburn.

Richard Rodgers (music), Oscar Hammerstein II (lyrics), Ernest Lehman (script), Robert Wise (director), *The Sound of Music*, 1965 film musical starring Julie Andrews; based on the stage musical debuting in 1959 with Rogers and Hammerstein (music and lyrics), Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse (book), starring Mary Martin.

Richard M. Sherman and Robert B. Sherman (lyrics and music), Bill Walsh and Don DaGradi (script), Robert Stevenson (director), *Mary Poppins*, 1964 film starring Julie Andrews; revised for a West End stage musical in 2004, with book by Julian Fellowes and additional music and lyrics by George Stiles and Anthony Drewe, starring Laura Michelle Kelly.

