

MUSICAL COMEDY 3.0

Disney's Phineas and Ferb as Animated, Digitalized, and Serialized Multi-generational Entertainment

Comedia Musical 3.0

Phineas y Ferb de Disney como Entretenimiento Multigeneracional de Animación, Digitalizado y Serializado

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INTRODUCTION

Imagine the year is 1902 and you're wondering, as a fan of operetta and musical comedy, when sound and music will find homes in motion pictures. You have twenty-five years to wait until 1927 and *The Jazz Singer*. Let's move up to 1943. Now you're wondering when new musical comedies, not simply shows originally written for stage or screen, will be created for that infant medium television? This time it's fifteen years before Richard Rodgers's and Oscar Hammerstein II's *Cinderella!* Originally written for network TV and broadcast in 1957, a longer and more fulsome version of the show finally made it to Broadway in 2013, seventy years later.

Now imagine that it's 1992. Entire mini-musical comedies have already been broadcast as episodes of *The Simpsons* (1989-), television's innovative but mostly non-musical animated series, and *Family Guy* (1998-) is about to begin parodying stage- and screen-musical sources from *H.M.S. Pinafore* (1878) to *The Music Man* (stage 1957; screen 1962)¹. Existing musicals, too, continue to be

1. Unless otherwise indicated, stage dates refer to years of Broadway openings, while television dates refer to initial broadcast years. Screen dates refer to initial years of releases.

(re)filmed for television—*The Music Man*, for example, in 2003. How long, you wonder, before television significantly or even entirely re-casts musical comedies in animated, digitalized, and serialized form? What will such programs be like? What of their music? Their social and cultural contents, if any? And what will viewers think of them? Another fifteen years must pass before *Phineas and Ferb* (2007-2015) becomes a prominent programmatic offering on both the Disney and Disney XD networks.

The following pages are devoted to answering the questions posed above, with references not only to *Phineas and Ferb*, but also to other stage, large-screen, and small-screen musicalized entertainments. Issues touched on include accepted musical-comedy traditions and ways in which Disney's series incorporates or violates many of them; the series' own story lines and narrational tropes; a variety of political, social, and cultural issues; and series content in terms of science fiction, children's programming, language and linguistic issues, and references to past historical and intellectual phenomena aimed at older as well as younger viewers.

(RE-)DEFINING MUSICAL COMEDY ON TV

Defining «musical comedy» can be tricky. Certainly there are different kinds of shows, of different lengths, and with different kinds of music. A great many Americans enjoy or deplore musicals as «stagey» entertainments that feature choruses as well as solo songs, incorporate dance, and end happily. There is truth in these generalizations, even though a few critics have suggested that rock movies, documentaries, and even so-called «mockumentaries» such as *This is Spinal Tap* (1984) must also be considered «musicals» if audiences accept them as such². Film, of course, provides opportunities that live performances cannot match. Compare the stage version of *The Sound of Music*, the last Rodgers & Hammerstein show, produced on Broadway in 1959, with the film version, directed by Robert Wise and released in 1965. The movie is filled with gorgeous establishing shots and background sounds the stage show couldn't possibly equal. But other, less immediately apparent differences between the two productions are also telling. In the film adaptation, the opening sacred chorus of nuns is replaced by a secular solo number. More important: several songs from the stage version—including «No Way to Stop It» and «How Can Love Survive?»—do not appear in the film, reinforcing the movie's sweeter, less cynical story about love between a baron and a governess in 1930s Austria. The film deliberately downplays the Trapp Family's

2. See Caine, 2008.

real-life Catholic values, and both stage and large-screen iterations ignore certain aspects of Austrian history³.

For several decades, rumors have circulated that worthwhile musical comedies are dead or dying. These rumors are easily overthrown: consider the recent, spectacular successes of *The Book of Mormon* (2011) and *Hamilton* (2015). Nevertheless, an increasing number of «new» shows, both staged and filmed, are often categorized as «McMusicals»: inferior or recycled productions churned out by teams of choreographers and producers instead of independent, theater-savvy writers (Grant, 2004, p. 309). Also known as «jukeboxicals», «popicals», and «revisicals», McMusicals have been all but patented by the Walt Disney Company. By the early 2000s Disney «had become Broadway's most powerful and successful producer of [McM]usicals by tapping its reserve of pre-sold animated feature films and remarking them for the stage» (Singer, 2004, p. 161). And screen.

Those critics who have deplored the imagined absence of recent musical-comedy innovations, and who—for one reason or another, have dismissed everything from *Mamma Mia!* (London stage 1999; screen 2008) and beyond—seem to have missed the point where *Phineas and Ferb* is concerned (Singer, 2004, pp. 227-242). This small-screen series simultaneously builds upon and transcends the conventions associated with stage and large-screen musical comedies, re-conceptualizing some of those conventions within an animated, digitalized, and serialized framework. As such, *Phineas and Ferb*, as well as a few other animated series, represents «a workable new economic model» that can «support creative new musical theater» in virtual rather than physical space⁴.

Put it this way: *Phineas and Ferb* represents an innovative form of entertainment I call «Musical Comedy 3.0». As such, it simultaneously incorporates aspects of older book-based productions such as *Show Boat* (stage 1927; screen 1936 and 1961) and *Oklahoma!* (stage 1943; screen 1955)—together, «Musical Comedy 1.0»—and of newer shows such as Disney's *The Lion King* (screen 1994; stage 1997), *Aladdin* (screen 1992), and the enormously successful *High School Musical* series (screen 2006-2008)—together, «Musical Comedy 2.0». This is not to suggest that *Phineas and Ferb* is the only musicalized animated series on television,

3. Some of these issues are discussed in Saffle, 2004.

4. Grant, 2004, pp. 314-315. Conceived as animated entertainment, *Phineas and Ferb* has not worked well on the legitimate stage. In 2011 Disney licensed a traveling theatrical entertainment called *Phineas and Ferb: The Best LIVE Show Ever*, which played in Buffalo, New York, and other smaller cities. The productions met with little commercial success.

nor has it always been the most popular⁵. Nevertheless, the series ended it had become Disney's longest-running animated TV program to date, and another of the studio's musical breakthroughs that began with the *Silly Symphonies* (1929-1939) and went on to include *Snow White* (1937) and *Fantasia* (1940)⁶.

In its eclectic adaptations of musical styles *Phineas and Ferb* constitutes the most diverse of Disney multitudinous offerings, and it remains by far the most intelligently and thoroughly musicalized of that company's «cartoons». Dan Povenmire and Jeff «Swampy» Marsh, its creators, managed to incorporate historical references and sophisticated moments of self-referentiality in a long-running, easily accessible entertainment that's also family-friendly. Like all three *High School Musical* movies, *Phineas and Ferb* represents constitutes an exception to Jack Harrison's rules that «serial musical[s] ... [have] almost never been successful», and that «even in film and on stage, musical sequels have almost always flopped»⁷.

STORY LINES, SITUATIONS, AND CHARACTERS: MUSICAL-COMEDY CONVENTIONS I

The series' three fundamental plot lines feature Phineas Flynn and Ferb Fletcher, half-brothers and mechanical geniuses who spend each day of summer vacation inventing or building something amazing: a rollercoaster, a super-computer, a giant, remote-controlled bowling ball, and so on (Plot Line 1). Candace Flynn, the boys' insecure fifteen-year-old sister, desires above all to «bust» her brothers but never really succeeds (Plot Line 2), usually because one of Dr. Heinz Doofenschmirtz's clever but ultimately useless inventions gets in the way (Plot Line 3). «Doof» and «Dr. D», as he is also known, calls all of his inventions «-inators». Other characters include Linda Flynn, also known as «Mom» (and the biological mother of Phineas and Candace), Lawrence Fletcher, also known as «Dad» (and the biological father of Ferb), pretty Isabella Garcia-Shapiro who

5. Occasionally, however, *Phineas and Ferb* has been the most popular. During the week of 18-24 May 2009, «Perry Lays an Egg» and «Gaming the System»—a double episode (57-58)—attracted a larger audience of six- to fourteen-year-old viewers than any other show broadcast during the same time slot. See Seidman, 2009. «Phineas and Ferb's Christmas Vacation!» (episode 84), broadcast on 7 December 2009, garnered 2.62 million viewers: up to that time the most watched telecast in Disney XD's history. See Anthony Jones, «Disney XD Earns Most-Watched Day and Telecast with 'Phineas and Ferb Christmas Vacation'», *All Headline News* (8 December 2009). This and other *TV by the Numbers* posts accessed 15 March 2019 at <https://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/category/daily-ratings>.

6. For additional information about Disney televisual history, see Telotte, 2004.

7. Harrison, 2012, p. 259. *Glee* (2009-2015), Harrison's principal subject, deserves attention as yet another venue for televisual musicalized entertainment.

lives across the street from the Flynn-Fletchers and dotes on Phineas, neighborhood bully Buford, and South Asian quiz kid Baljeet. A favorite with children is the Flynn-Fletchers' pet platypus Perry — who, as a participant in Plot Line 3 (a fact unknown even to Phineas and Ferb)—is also «Agent P»: an animal spy who spends part of each episode foiling Doof's efforts to dominate the otherwise unidentified «tri-state area». See Illustrations 1 and 2.



Illustration 1. Important *Phineas and Ferb* characters. From left to right: Lawrence Fletcher, Linda Flynn, Candace, Ferb, Phineas, and Perry the Platypus.

In spite of 30- and 60-minute programming limitations, which include substantial advertising breaks, almost every *Phineas and Ferb* episode—whether 11, 22, or 44 minutes long—incorporates all three plot lines as well as many of the narrational, organizational, and performative conventions associated with late nineteenth- and twentieth-century operettas and musicals⁸. Identified by Stephen

8. Unless otherwise indicated, *Phineas and Ferb* episodes are identified according to Wikipedia by «overall number» rather than individual seasons and season numbers. Accessed 15

Banfield, these conventions include opening ensembles that feature beautiful girls, scenes involving mistaken identity and exchanges of money, back-stage story lines, ball and party scenes, lots of humor, and happy endings based on the resolution of interpersonal problems (including a few romantic difficulties)⁹. As a series, *Phineas and Ferb* also ignores some of Banfield's points, including medley overtures (each episode opens with a series theme song, performed by Bowling for Soup), explicitly erotic issues (this is a Disney program, after all), and the use of a theater orchestra. Of course no quarter-hour, half-hour, or hour-long TV show can provide «a whole evening's entertainment, divided into two or three acts»¹⁰. The very notion of «whole evenings» has been challenged by binge watching and internet streaming. Individual *Phineas and Ferb* episodes, among them a great many of the series' musical numbers, can be watched or re-watched online and can be commented on by bloggers and tweeters¹¹.

SONGS AND ENSEMBLE NUMBERS: MUSICAL-COMEDY CONVENTIONS II

As Banfield explains, songs and ensemble numbers in musicals characteristically alternate with «spoken dialogue, always in the audience's own language». In so-called «book musicals», songs should illuminate individual dramatic contexts as well as reflect their characters' assigned roles and shifting moods. The show's 222 segments of varying length include a great many, dramatically appropriate numbers of a great many kinds: torch songs and ballads, comic songs, and antique as well as contemporary numbers. Among those that reference or simulate staged or large-screened musical styles are Busby Berkeley spectaculars, 1940s Broadway show-stoppers, and Cab Calloway-style big-band blues. Other styles include hard-edged Chicago blues, 1960s girl-group trios, and 1970s disco dance numbers. In «Gaming the System» (episode 58), one of Dr. Doofenschmertz's musical numbers includes a visual reference to the Broadway show *Follies* (1971), complete with chorus line. Occasionally too, «harsher musical idioms, including rock», are employed to express anxiety or disgust¹². In «My Fair Goalie» (episode

July 2018 at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Phineas_and_Ferb_episodes. Unless otherwise indicated, all URLs cited in the present article were accessed or re-accessed on this date.

9. See Banfield, 2005.

10. Banfield, 2005, p. 295. Several short quotations from Banfield's article are not foot-noted separately below.

11. For years Disney has used clips from individual episodes as internet «music videos» advertising the series. See Saffle, 2017.

12. Banfield, 2005, pp. 295, 303.

132), British visitor and Ferb cousin Eliza Fletcher—her very name is a reference to *My Fair Lady* (stage 1956, screen 1964)—sings «Lady Song», an instructional number about English etiquette¹³. After a genteel introduction, however, Eliza breaks into a punk rock chorus complete with pogo dancing and unruly hair.

Almost every musical number in *Phineas and Ferb* is cast in familiar 32-bar or AABA pop-song form, although brief introductions, extended or repeated phrases, and codas are fairly common. With assistance from composer Danny Jacobs, many of the series' ensembles and songs are collaborations with series creators Povenmire and Marsh, both of whom possess considerable pop-music as well as animation experience. The hundreds of numbers featured in the series, as well as the series itself, have earned a host of awards, including Emmys involving music: in 2008 for both the show's theme and for «I Ain't Got Rhythm»¹⁴ from «Dude, We're Getting the Band Back Together» (episode 22); and in 2010 for «Come Home Perry» from «Oh, There You Are, Perry» (episode 64)¹⁵.

In good musical-comedy style, *Phineas and Ferb* provides each important character with at least one important vocal opportunity. This would be impossible in any single televised episode, but serialization allows characters to reappear and perform again and again. Furthermore, a few numbers are reprised both within and across episodes. The series' theme song is several times reworked for dramatic purposes, and its very first pop-style offering, «Gitchee Gitchee Goo», reappears a half-dozen times in various contexts¹⁶. Perry too has his own theme song, and the evil doctor has a sort of radio call signal—«Doofenschmirtz Evil, Incorporated!»—that 'plays' whenever establishing shots introduce him at work in his office building.

Individual episodes also incorporate or reference other Banfield conventions. «Rollercoaster: The Musical» (episode 110) is all about recasting an existing non-musical episode as a mini-musical comedy. The result is «Rollercoaster», the series' opener and one of only four episodes that doesn't include one or more musical numbers. In the music, sung by Phineas, that opens «Rollercoaster: The [Mc] Musical», we encounter glimpses of previous stage and large-screen successes, including *Cats* (1981), *The Phantom of the Opera* (1986), *Singing in the Rain* (screen 1952, stage 1985), and the Hollywood version of *West Side Story* (1962).

13. «Lady Song». Accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pp340PzhsaM>.

14. «I Ain't got Rhythm». Accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Oj79WGfQec>.

15. «Come Home Perry». Accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pFXpTazQJeQ>.

16. «Gitchee Gitchee Goo». Accessed as one of its reprises at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b0PpsQ3wcUc>.

Much of the show's music involves vocal and instrumental «off-stage» or background numbers. Borrowed from Disney's *High School Musical* series, Ashley Tisdale voices Candace's dialogue and sings some of her songs. In *Nerds of a Feather* (episode 102), though, Laura Dickinson à la Carly Simon sings «Ducky Momo is my Friend»: a number that explains Candace's lifelong fascination with her favorite childhood toy¹⁷. Other musical interludes are as much instrumental as vocal. The boys themselves frequently whale away on electric guitars, and Ferb also plays percussion and doubles from time to time on saxophone, trombone, trumpet, and electric piano. Buford, rather surprisingly, plays the violin as well as the tambourine and drums. Appearing on stage as the leader of a faux-techno 1980s band, Lawrence sings «Alien Heart» and plays the keytar, while his backup group, the Mainframes (i.e., Phineas and Ferb), play synthesizers. All this in «Ladies and Gentlemen, Meet Max Modem!» (episode 105).

Contrasts are a requirement of successful entertainments, and touristic references to distant places and cultures appear in more than a few *Phineas and Ferb* episodes. In «Summer Belongs to You» (episode 101), an hour-long special, Candace, Isabella, and the boys stop in Tokyo, the Himalayas, and Paris during an around-the-world jaunt. In each of these places, «exotic» musical styles are parodied: J-pop in Tokyo, a Bollywood song-and-dance spectacular somewhere in northern India, and «City of Love», a plaintive number performed during the show's Parisian stopover by Isabella, who pours out her pre-adolescent heart to Disney's television audience¹⁸. Here we encounter Banfield's reference to songs about nostalgia and loss. As Isabella's momentarily unimaginative sidekick (and potential romantic partner), Phineas ignores the City of Light's romantic associations, thinking only of way to repair the gang's damaged jet plane.

Banfield also evokes musical-stylistic references to The Other, which is not precisely the same thing. In *West Side Story*, for example, the cultural and musical Other is represented musically by Puerto Rican sounds characters, who initiate or participate in most of the show's conflicts. Visits to India and Paris involve real places, but a few *Phineas and Ferb* episodes incorporate Central European-themed numbers associated with Drusselstein, an imaginary nation stuck mostly in the Middle Ages and Dr. Doofenschmirtz's native land. In «The Dunkelberry Imperative» (episode 152), Doof returns home to renew his driving license, only to learn he must take that country's challenging road test again. Engaging Agent P's sympathy as automotive passenger, he completes the test

17. «Ducky Momo is My Friend». Accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u5rR9ROJ5u4>.

18. «The City of Love». Accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=95uNiwotdaI>.

to the tune of a rustic and vigorous «driving-test waltz» sung (off-stage, so to speak), by Aaron Jacob¹⁹.

«Last Train to Bustville» (episode 116) introduces viewers to a quite different Other: an older woman, herself a railroad engineer, obsessed with hard work. The engineer keeps urging Candace not to «give up» in her struggle to bust her brothers, but the girl hears only those two words, takes them to heart, and decides to pack it in. «Give Up», the ensuing parody of Christian rock, is comparatively long, with several verses and choruses sung by Danny Jacob and Laura Dickinson; it ends with the words «it's beautiful, man!»—a reference to 1960s hippies spoken by Candace relaxing in a hammock²⁰. «Last Train to Bustville» also invokes Otherness in two quite different ways: the episode is set in open country instead of the series' familiar suburban neighborhood, and it momentarily suggests a kind of rebellion that most of the *Phineas and Ferb* characters avoid.

TELEVISUAL AUDIENCES AND FAMILY-FRIENDLY VALUES: CULTURAL ISSUES I

All this raises two new questions: Who watches animated shows broadcast on American television? And why? An important point to keep in mind: musical comedies are always about more than music.

It is easy to unpack the principal metanarrational assumptions that underline *Phineas and Ferb* as Disney product. America's economic prosperity (although not necessarily its global military and industrial superiority) is one of them; heterosexual love as healthy and normal is another; the social importance of the nuclear family a third. Exceptions exist, but they are clearly exceptions. The Flynn-Fletcher's mixed marriage, Doof's divorce and socially destructive schemes, and Buford's angry outbursts make the series livelier as well as more appealing to twenty-first-century audiences.

Furthermore, like *A Chorus Line* (1975) and other concept musicals, *Phineas and Ferb* helps audiences «teas[e] out the relationship between representation and reality»²¹. The series' ritualized plot elements and continuously recycled mantras

19. «The Dangerous Drusselstein Driving-test Waltz». Accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WWwiKjCli94>.

20. «Give Up». Accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=USvy13YFkPE>.

21. Stempel, 2010, p. 603. The term «concept musical» is often defined as less involved with plot and more with style, message, and thematic metaphor. Although only a few *Phineas and Ferb* episodes or musical numbers within them can be described in «concept» terms, some can. «Give Up» is one example.

remind viewers of its artificiality. Running gags include Phineas's often-repeated phrase «Hey Ferb, I know what we're gonna do today!» and Isabella's sing-song greeting «What'cha do-in'?» Almost every character asks «Hey, where's Perry?» on one occasion or another, although viewers know Agent P is off on yet another mission to foil one of Doof's schemes. After yet another defeat, the evil doctor usually cries out, «Curse you, Perry the Platypus!» Ferb, however, rarely speaks more than once an episode.

In many respects *Phineas and Ferb* clearly resembles many of Disney's previous forays into family-friendly entertainment. Unlike *The Simpsons*, *South Park* (1997-), and *Family Guy*—all of them long-running animated TV comedy series, and all of them frequently (but by no means consistently) musicalized—*Phineas and Ferb* seems safe and gentle. Except for a very few fart jokes and veiled references to excrement, the series avoids vulgarity. It is never obscene or profane. Above all, it is never explicitly critical of the innumerable injustices and irrationalities associated with America's political and social institutions. *South Park*, on the other hand, is both crass *and* critical; its many episodes call to mind Greek Old Comedy, full of sex and politics. *Phineas and Ferb* calls Roman New Comedy to mind: a less explicitly satirical form of entertainment, and one of Banfield's operetta and musical-comedy tropes.

Which brings us to sex, youthful and otherwise. In most *Phineas and Ferb* episodes, romantic love is Candace's province; she has a painfully intense crush on Jeremy Johnson, a minor character, and lives for his phone calls. (Susie, Jeremy's strange little sister, despises Candace and often plays tricks on her.) Isabella has an equally painful crush on Phineas and dreams of marrying him one day. Like Isabella, however, Candace is little more than a daydreamer when it comes to cuddling and kissing. Furthermore, neither girl is depicted as physically mature. Candace lacks visible bust, waist, and hips²², while the show's grown-up females—Linda, Isabella's mother Mrs. Garcia-Shapiro, and the chorus girls who buzz around Doof during the Broadway show-stoppers he occasionally produces—have shapely figures. Just once, and just before the end of «Summer Belongs to You», does Jeremy give Candace a real kiss. Just once, and shortly before the end of *Across the 2nd Dimension* (2011; the first full-length *Phineas and Ferb* movie), does Isabella kiss Phineas—but only after she confirms that Doof's amnesia-inator will erase the boy's memory of the event.

22. In «Quantum Boogaloo», Candace is sometimes drawn with a fuller figure. In those scenes, however, twenty years have passed and she has children of her own.

The older Flynn-Fletchers are unquestionably, if somewhat surreptitiously, fond of each other. In «Ferb Latin» (episode 138), the couple retreats to the sensory deprivation tank Linda keeps in the family's basement. The boys' parents eat pie in the tank, but what else (if anything) they do there remains a mystery. In «Dude, We're Getting the Band Back Together», however, Linda and Lawrence kiss on screen. Vanessa, Doof's daughter and the show's only physically mature young woman, flirts with several boys, including Ferb, and in «Vanessasary Roughness» (episode 69) she kisses him on the cheek. That, however, is as far as she goes. Doof occasionally expresses an interest in the opposite sex, although the attractive woman he takes to dinner in «Chez Platypus» (episode 56) and who momentarily becomes his own «evil love», abandons him when one of his —inators accidentally transforms her ardor into indifference.

Television audiences love the unusual, but they also love characters they can identify with. Nor should those characters be too consistent in their behavior. In Disney's series, Phineas and Ferb aren't always «right», and Doof isn't always «wrong». Buford, as we shall see below, isn't always a stereotypical bully, nor is Baljeet always grade-grubbing and fearful. Candace's character is more complex. Often she's cast simply as a self-obsessed adolescent; a poster on one of her bedroom walls reads «Me, Myself, and I», and she sings a song based on those words in «Split Personality» (episode 108)²³. As a «mere girl» she seems «passive, dependent, and overly concerned with ...[her] physical appearance», especially when Jeremy's around (Huston et al., 1992, p. 27). But Candace isn't always girly when she attempts to bust her brothers. Although she eschews regular exercise, in «Fireside Girl Jamboree» (episode 77) she joins Isabella's troop and earns 50 patches in a single day: an all-time record. Nor does she invariably wear her signature miniskirt, anklets, and flats. In «Phineas and Ferb and the Temple of Juatchadoon» (episode 143), she plays an enterprising 1930s newspaper reporter outfitted in a man's olive-drab, three-piece suit, lace-up leather shoes, and pork pie hat. Thanks to one of her brothers' remarkable gadgets, she briefly exchanges minds with Agent P in «Does this Duckbill Make Me Look Fat?» (episode 37) and, somewhat androgynously, briefly becomes «Perry the Teenage Girl», complete with her own James Bond-style theme song.

23. Before or during early 2019, «Me, Myself, and I» was withdrawn from YouTube and other online venues due to copyright issues.

DISNEY AND SOCIAL AWARENESS: CULTURAL ISSUES II

For decades, critics have attacked the Disney Company's reliance on the family-friendly metanarrational underpinnings identified above. Recently, issues of racial and gendered stereotyping have come under especially intense scrutiny. Today, a film like *Song of the South* (1946), with its unpleasantly stereotyped «Uncle Remus» references, would never reach American audiences. Even less offensive Disney offerings, however, have embodied «such all-American traits as [political] conservatism, homophobia, Manifest Destiny, ethnocentricity, cultural insensitivity, superficiality», and «lack of culture» (Wasko, 2001, p. 224). But times change, and decades ago Disney began changing with them. As early as 1991, the Company «formally instituted a nondiscrimination policy based on sexual orientation» at its theme parks (Griffin, 2005, p. 131). More recently, Disney's production teams have somewhat intermittently begun to address ethnic, environmental, and gendered issues. Biases linger, but many of «the most stinging assaults» on recent Disney productions may be «knee-jerk» reactions from conservatives and leftists alike (Wasko, 2001, p. 225).

Phineas and Ferb mostly embodies more positive Disney metanarratives: those associated with «the American personality as fun-loving, innocent, [and] optimistic» and with «American ingenuity and cleverness» (Wasko, 2001, p. 224). In no way is the series altogether insensitive, consistently ethnocentric, or culturally superficial. True: most of its characters are European-Americans, including every member of the Flynn-Fletcher and Johnson families. In other respects, however, the series is ethnically diverse: Baljeet is Asian-Indian, Stacy (Candace's best friend) is Japanese-American, and Isabella is Latina-Jewish. Ferb and Lawrence speak with British accents and Dr. Doofenschmirtz speaks at least a little German. In «Split Personality», Drusselstein, Doof's native land, is portrayed as a stereotypical Medieval Germanic land, with clothing and serfs to match.

Several series children possess other multicultural skills. Ferb speaks at least a little Japanese; Buford speaks French (and possibly Latin), and Baljeet—here, as it happens, an ethnic stereotype kicks in—is a cowardly and suspicious mathematical genius who sometimes helps Phineas and Ferb with their experiments. Even most of the extraterrestrials the boys encounter are friendly and helpful; only the power-hungry Mitch, Doof's counterpart in «The Chronicles of Meap» (episode 59) set on the gentler Meap's home world, is an exception. There are few African Americans among *Phineas and Ferb*'s regular cast, but Fireside Girl Holly boasts a darker complexion. Guest stars such as Chaka Kahn make occasional appearances, and her lively voiced-over performance at the beginning of «Summer Belongs to You!» is referenced repeatedly throughout the hour-long episode.

Only the imaginary inhabitants of Drusselstein are routinely depicted as stupid, contentious, and even cruel—possibly because they're in some sense «German».

Natural beauty is referred to regularly in *Phineas and Ferb* episodes, and environmental issues are sometimes invoked. When the Fireside Girls manage to locate an endangered tree, the last of its species, in «Isabella and the Temple of Sap» (episode 75), they drain off some of its sap—but without injuring the tree. In «Ferb Latin», Phineas proudly announces that the new language invented by him and his brother is superior to Pig Latin because «it's safe for vegetarians to use!» Specific religious beliefs are entirely ignored, but ethnic and faith-based practices are occasionally referenced. At one point in «Christmas Vacation», Isabella reminds the boys that her family celebrates Hanukkah. Other episodes mention Bar Mitzvas and latkes, albeit in passing.

Issues and attitudes about gender are much more frequently foregrounded and female characters often come out ahead. Isabella is ready for any adventure; she and the other Fireside Girls hike, climb, and swim to earn merit patches for their uniform sashes. Once or twice Isabella even takes on Buford, the heavy-set neighborhood bully, and manages to defeat him. Linda may be a housewife today, but she used to be a rock star known as «Lindana», and in several episodes—including «Flop Starz» (episode 3) and «Ladies and Gentlemen, Meet Max Modem!»—she again performs to wild applause.

A few episodes are even more explicitly gender-conscious. In «Gaming the System», we learn that long ago, in Drusselstein, Doof's mother hoped for a baby girl and made heaps of frilly dresses for the child-to-be. By the time a second baby boy—Roger, Doof's younger brother—was born, the family was too poor to purchase more fabric and Doof had to wear the frocks himself. Seeking revenge, the grown-up scientist creates a «ballgown-inator» that imprisons anyone struck by its ray in a prom gown. Phineas and Ferb themselves end up in drag when the machine misfires, and even Perry is briefly trapped in a sea-green confection. No on-screen character seems to pay much attention to these incidents, although Jeremy gives the cross-dressed boys a quizzical glance before going about his business. Again, see Illustration 2.

One of the series' most complex characters, especially in gendered terms, is Buford. A self-proclaimed he-man, he nevertheless carries a velvet rope with him wherever he goes. «Where do you keep that?» Phineas asks in «Chez Platypus». To which Buford replies, «I'll never tell!» At one point in «What'd I Miss?» (episode 171)—and while dressed in an army drill sergeant's uniform—he skillfully performs several ballet steps. And only Buford voluntarily cross-dresses: once in imitation of Isabella and at the beginning of «La Candace-Cabra» (episode 192) in order to deliver her signature «What'cha do-in'?» greeting; and once in

imitation of Susie Johnson, who frightens him badly, in «One Good Scare Ought to Do it!» (episode 39).



Illustration 2. Dr. D's ball-gowninator imprisons Perry in a dress, while a kick line of chorus girls celebrate the invention. Note the references to the musical comedy *Follies*.

Baljeet is the most ethnically marginalized character in the series and is usually portrayed as an immigrant nerd; often he tolerates Buford's abuse, and in «That's the Spirit» (episode 134) he dresses up as a daisy for Halloween. In «Isabella and the Temple of Sap», Ginger, one of the Fireside Girls (and Stacy's sister), places an «I Just Saw a Cute Boy» patch on her sash. When Milly, another troop member, realizes the patch refers to Baljeet, she removes it from Ginger's uniform. But Baljeet isn't always depicted as weak, unattractive, or effeminate. In «Bully Bromance Breakup» (episode 150), he manages to climb Danville Mountain with assistance from his friends, and in «Tour de Ferb» (episode 130) he wins a bicycle race after real-life Greg Lamond gives him some voiced-over encouragement. Nor does Buford always abuse Baljeet. As frenemies in «Lotsa Latkes» (episode 137), the mismatched pair join forces in an old-fashioned vaudeville number, both of them decked out in white ties, tails, and spats.

ENTERTAINMENT ACROSS GENERATIONS

1. *Science Fiction*. Four subordinate, yet closely related ways in which *Phineas and Ferb* renegotiate the meaning of musical comedy involve the series'

science-fictional elements, its messages for children, its poetic (i.e., playful and precise) uses of language, and its cross-generational cultural references. Of these, the most obvious is science fiction. In «Run Away Runway» (episode 9), Ferb momentarily works on a cold-fusion reactor: a reference to the cold-fusion craze of the early 1980s. In «Unfair Science Fair» (episode 46), a portal to Mars accidentally transports Candace to the Red Planet, where its little green inhabitants proclaim her their queen. In «Meapless in Seattle» (episode 153) the boys encounter surprisingly mild-mannered space aliens.

The most sophisticated science-fictional speculation belongs to «Phineas and Ferb's Quantum Boogaloo» (episode 72). In an episode lasting just twenty-two minutes, story author Scott Peterson establishes and develops a series of time-travel loops that rival in complexity those of Gregory Benford's prize-winning novel *Timescape* (1979). A professor of physics at the University of California, Irvine, Benford based his speculations on real-life quantum mechanics and the Wheeler-Feynman theory of particle interactions. Peterson's inspiration probably came from Povenmire and Marsh, who collaborated in writing «It's About Time!» (episode 21), an earlier offering in which the boys and their sister take a ride into the distant past, using a device borrowed from George Pal's 1960 film adaptation of H. G. Wells's novella *The Time Machine* (1895). In «Quantum Boogaloo», a scientist from the past, dressed in nineteenth-century garb, rides the George Pal/Wells machine into one of the show's scenes, complicating things in a variety of ways. But everything works out, when Isabella prevents the rest of the episode from ever having taking place.

2. *Children and Program Content.* *Phineas and Ferb* is ostensibly children's programming, even though its characters refer to *Hamlet*, quantum physics, and the Baltic Sea. Marsh, the series' co-creator and -composer, has stated that he didn't create the show and its characters *just* for kids; he simply did not exclude them as an audience²⁴. Nevertheless, the series occasionally educates as well as entertains. The lyrics that accompany Doof's Drusselstein musicalized driving test identify dangers that younger audience members should avoid when they acquire automobiles of their own. For teens and older viewers, the song reminds them of their own driving-test anxieties.

3. *Language and Linguistics.* In several respects *Phineas and Ferb* may be considered «poetic» rather than «scientific» or intentionally «juvenile». Emily Nussbaum considers the entire series «almost sonnet-like in its precision», although

24. Marjorie Galas, «Phineas and Ferb: Music, Mischief, and the Endless Summer Vacation», *411 News* online. Accessed at <https://web.archive.org/web/20090607043445/http://www.resource411.com/411Update/Issue/Articles/Story.cfm?StoryID=1020>.

she neglects to mention that «imprecise» sonnets employ different organizational schemes and incorporate irregularities such as broken feet, uneven scansion, and off-rhymes (Nussbaum, 2012, p. 115). In any event, Phineas, Ferb, and friends are fascinated with grammar, syntax, and increasing their vocabularies. In «Tri-Stone Area» (episode 140), the brothers, cast as youthful cave dwellers, invent modern English, although they use it only once, near the end of the episode. At one point in «Isabella and the Temple of Sap» we learn that «stickiness is the most underrated of all the nesses». But it's Buford who comes up with perhaps the most ridiculous and yet strangely sophisticated figure of speech in the entire series: «I am to metaphor cheese as metaphor cheese is to transitive verb crackers!» («We call it Maze», episode 102).

Because *Phineas and Ferb* episodes can be watched on most small-screen devices, they can also be paused or replayed so that certain audio-visual details can be examined carefully. This includes striking references to ordinary English. In «Lotsa Latkes» (episode 137), Phineas several times consults Ferb's list of S-words «rarely used by kids». Actually reading this digital list, which lingers for c. 0.5 seconds on-screen, requires a pause button, but the effort is worth it. Most adults probably don't know what «sabretache», «siccimeter», or «spagyrist» mean; I had to look up the last two words myself.

More conventionally poetic, perhaps, are the series' song lyrics. For Grant, «contemporary pop» has «decimated songwriting language», and «jukeboxicals» such as *Mamma Mia* and *Jersey Boys* (stage 2005, screen 2014) comprise «desperate attempts to salvage the songs of Gershwin, [Cole] Porter, Kern, and even Burt Bacharach» — as well as those of ABBA and the Four Seasons — for latter-day use (Grant, 2004, p. 312). This simply isn't true of *Phineas and Ferb*. Povenmire and Marsh may be composers as well as cartoonists, but their work and that of their collaborators is often word-driven. Porter's lyrics for «Bianca» in *Kiss Me, Kate!* (stage 1948, screen 1952) are less family-friendly than Jon Cotton Barry's for «Ducky Momo is My Friend». Both men, however, employ equally unusual and playful rhymes: «spank ya», «Sanka», and «Bianca» for Porter, «slow-mo» (slow-motion), «know mo» (know more), «no-no», and «Momo» for Barry.

4. *Grown-up Content*. More than a few *Phineas and Ferb* episodes contain historical and intellectual references aimed at older viewers. Perry's antics are suitable entertainment for children, and Candace's confused romantic relationship with Jeremy resonates with teens and especially with tweens²⁵. On the

25. «Tweens» have been defined as boys and girls aged ten to twelve or nine to fourteen. Today they comprise a considerable portion of Disney's TV audience. Accessed, respectively, at <http://eds.a.ebscohost.com/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=0&sid=f86b58cb-3bd9-4072-aae3->

other hand, how many people today in the United States remember vacuum tubes or understand how they worked? In «Phineas' Birthday Clip-O-Rama» (episode 117), Dr. Doofenschmirtz's latest -inator needs a few minutes to warm up because it employs those long-outmoded electrical devices. References like these are sometimes explained, perhaps to educate younger viewers. In the first of two musical «Cliptastic Countdowns» (episode 73), Doof points to an ape sitting at a typewriter and asks rhetorically, «What is this, 1987?» What Dr. D doesn't explain is that apes and typewriters have long been associated with the so-called «infinite monkey theorem»: a mathematical proof that, given enough time, enough random combinations of letters would eventually duplicate ... and at this point variant endings include «all of Shakespeare's plays» and «all of the books in the British Museum» (Gamow, 1971, p. 209). Whatever else these and other «grown-up» references may contribute to a TV series ostensibly aimed at kids, they unquestionably provide older viewers with something to laugh about.

CONCLUSIONS

Writing a decade ago about 1990s teen films and their reception, Wheeler Dixon proclaimed that young Americans will continue to «demand new versions of the classic genre tales that enthralled us in our youth... As the millennium draws to a close», he predicted, «we will be seeing the same stories in slightly renewed versions» (Dixon, 2000, p. 140). Today, tween and teen entertainment is increasingly small-screen based, and CDs and DVDs are disappearing as streaming transforms laptop computers and hand-held communications devices into libraries of virtual diversions. Television has contributed to this socio-technological revolution, if only because cable- and dish-accessible «narrowcasting» offers fans of many kinds—music enthusiasts, science-fiction enthusiasts, cartoon fans, and so on—the «concentrated consumption» they long for (Hodkinson, 2011, p. 255).

To sum up: *Phineas and Ferb* isn't merely entertaining or clever. It has also brought a form of quasi-traditional, yet essentially postmodern musical comedy to Disney's public. Whether the series' brand of animated, digitalized, and musicalized small-screen serial programming will triumph over stage and film musicals remains to be seen. Already it seems clear, however, that *Phineas and*

Ferb has contributed to and even helped define an increasingly sophisticated, trans-McMusical, 3.0 form of American entertainment²⁶.

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