European operatic history abounds with violence: Don Giovanni, of 1787, opens with on-stage murder and develops from attempted rape through misuses of power to the destruction of the title figure, in 1814, Fidelio deals with torture, as does Tosca in 1900, Les Huguenots, of 1836, is about political violence, Faust (1859) shows the suffering of an abused girl who kills her new-born child and herself, ethnic turbulence is the basis for Aida (1871) and Carmen (1875). In any case the violent acts are at the heart of the plots, as source of action, turning point, or result, and thus are directly linked with the fate of the hero or heroine. Without the violent core the basic story line could not work.

American opera was utterly late in becoming independent of European patterns. The format was too distant from American auto-stereotypes. It was impractical, functioned as an anti-democratic status-marker for the metropolitan plutocracies, and was overshadowed by the ballad and light opera tradition and vaudeville or musical comedies. When American composers did attempt indigenous music drama, it was often modeled after European patterns and detached from the contemporary U.S.A.: Horatio Parker’s Mona (1911), for example, staged the fights between the ancient Britons and Romans.

The only field in which American experiences were productive was the frontier and Indian opera. Walter Damrosch tried his hand at early Puritan intolerance in The Scarlet Letter (1896). Frederic Converse’s The Sacrifice (1911) staged the gruesome life of gold-rush California. Mary Carr Moore’s Narcissa (1911) dealt with natives who fight back missionaries on the Oregon frontier of the 1830s. In Charles Wakefield Cadman’s Shanewis, or the Robin Woman (1918) the main character is the Indian protegée of a rich Californian lady whose daughter is engaged to a young man who again has fallen in love with the heroine and follows her to the reservation; he is finally killed by the bow and arrow of her Indian lover. In all cases the sets and scenes are American,
yet their nostalgic impetus and formal characteristics remain confined to the standards of European romantic opera.

A more innovative work is Scott Joplin's *Treemonisha* (1915), which addresses the matter of black liberation and modernization in an all-black community immediately after the Civil War. Joplin topicalized the tensions within the community by having his heroine abducted by reactionary conjurors. Violence is highly stylized, and in the end most, if in no way all, cruel enemies are won over. Although the work was not produced before the 1970s, it is striking that the plot of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* includes a similar abduction of a woman by males fighting for predominance.

Ironically, a more important initiative to Americanize libretti came from Europe, via Giacomo Puccini. Already *Madama Butterfly* (1904), based on a play by David Belasco, had staged American imperialism as a background for character analysis. More topical still was *La Fanciulla del West* (1910). Drawing on the frontier pattern, it depicts the joyless life during the Californian gold fever of 1849/50, including shoot-outs and near-lynchings. Based on another Belasco play, it "transformed... a story of individuals in the real West into a kind of morality play set in a mythical arena where everything is outsized." Whereas in *Madama Butterfly* the destruction of Cho-sho-san, the honest victim of treacherous Lieutenant Linkerton, defines the very structure of the opera, in *Fanciulla* Puccini deviates from this pattern. The plot is dense with violent acts, but these rather define characters and setting than determine the plot: "Bandit" Dick Johnson is less brutal than his rival the Sheriff, and consequently wins the title heroine Minnie's love. Violence is acknowledged as a fact of (frontier) life, unavoidable, omnipresent, yet something one has to, and can, cope with.

Puccini's suggestion for Americanizing opera through a differing use of the violence theme did not take hold for two decades. Although institutions like the Metropolitan Opera held contests for operas written by Americans, the European standard repertoire was predominant. If the Twenties did not go completely without American works, it was through operas like Deems Taylor's highly derivative *The King's Henchmen* (1927), based on a nostalgic story by Edna Millay.
The field in which the contemporary musical theater was thriving was that of very light opera, the format which was to develop into the “musical.” It is a conflux of various forms of the nineteenth century: The ballad opera, which had been prominent from colonial days onwards (such as Gay and Pepusch’s *Beggar’s Opera*, of 1728, or Balfe’s *The Bohemian Girl*, of 1843); the musical extravaganza, which worked old and new popular forms of entertainment into plots made up to serve their respective stars; and the Gilbert and Sullivan operettas with sometimes sophisticated, satirical plots and highly complex songs, but pragmatic enough not to render speech in recitativo.

What constitutes an interesting link between these old formats and the emerging *American* opera is Kern and Hammerstein’s “musical show” *Show Boat* (1927), based on a novel by Edna Ferber. Even though it certainly does not come close to the opera format, unlike old-time operetta or vaudeville it “integrated score and dramatic truth” and was performed by the New York City Opera. In a serious way it deals with racism as a structural pattern of American life. As a Broadway production it was innovative through integrating blacks and whites on one stage. The story is that of impresario Captain Hawks’ family between the 1880s and the immediate present of 1927, including the love affair and marriage of Hawks’ daughter Magnolia and Ravenal. The latter turns out to be a killer on the run, who will leave his wife and young daughter after losing all their money.

The whites’ happy life of the first act and their disillusionment of the second act are segregated from the sphere of the blacks whose laboring keeps the “sweet, improbable and unreal world” (176) on board going:

Coloured folks work while de whitemen play
Loadin’ up boats wid de bales of cotton,
Gittin’ no rest till de judgment day. (12-13)

This collective statement of a “coloured chorus” is intensified in Joe’s famous “Ol’ Man River” aria. It contrasts the natural slowness and timeless disinterestedness of the river with the lives and desires of men slaving away their lives.
Dere's an ol' man called de Mississippi,
Dat's de ol' man dat I'd like to be;
What does he care if de world's got troubles?
What does he care if de land ain't free?

... 
You an' me we sweat an' strain,
Body all achin' an' racked wid pain.
"Tote dat barge!" "Lift dat bale!"
Git a little drunk an' you'll land in jail.
Ah gits weary an' sick of tryin';
Ah'm tired of livin' an' scared of dyin',
But ol' man River,
He jes' keeps rollin' alon'.

... 
Let me go 'way from de Mississippi,
Let me go 'way from de white man boss.
Show me dat stream called de River Jordan
Dat's de ol' stream dat I long to cross. (53-58)

To blacks violence is a permanent physical condition, to whites it is—quite like the violence of La Fanciulla del West—a matter of common if minor relevance.

Like Ravenel, Joe is not one to cross racial lines, unlike Julie, an actress of mixed parentage happily married to Caucasian Stephen, but as the South forbids mixed marriages they are guilty of miscegenation. One drop of blood makes a Negro a Negro! When the sheriff intervenes, Stephen reacts in a curiously aggressive act of self-defense: He cuts his wife's hand with a knife and drinks her blood to become a "Negro" himself. The trick does not work, though, and Julie is imprisoned and ends up a hopeless alcoholic in Chicago.

After some forty years of turmoil Magnolia and Ravenel are reunited. But their recurrent love motif (nos. 2, 16, 20) is outbalanced by the "Ol' Man River"-theme from the introduction through the aria (no. 3), its reprise in the second act (no. 26), and the finale. Cruel acts may be typical of the white sphere, from Ravenel's having shot someone to Hawks' admission that as a young man he had killed, too, and yet their violence seems to be acceptable, as the whites in the musical are given a happy ending. Structural violence only concerns the blacks, a situation they perceive as natural and eternal.
III

If the 1920s were an era of decline in American opera,¹⁰ the 1930s saw newly emerging creativity in the field. Among the factors responsible were a new consciousness of native values after the Crash of 1929, New Deal patronage for the arts, and the new audiences reached by media such as the radio and the record. Again European influences played a role:

Ernst Krenek’s *Jonny spielt auf*, performed at the Met in 1929, struck an American chord through its jazz-inspired music and its title character, an African-American entertainer. It hinted at violence, when Jonny steals a violin and fights a policeman, and when a European composer tries to commit suicide – acts which symbolize Europe’s morbidity and the Americans’ renewal of music. And when Alban Berg’s *Wozzek* came to the USA in 1931, it staged the terrors of a system which physically, psychologically, and socially produces extreme cruelty under the cover of rationalistic science. Its intensity made American composers see the potential of rendering devastating circumstances as possible operatic material.

Like Berg’s, most of the early attempts at American music drama had been adaptations from literature – from Bristow’s *Rip Van Winkle* of the mid-1800s through Damrosch’s *The Scarlet Letter* to *Show Boat* –, and this still applied for the three operas in which operatic independence was finally achieved in the 1930s. All were based on texts from the 1920s: Virgil Thomson’s *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1934) renders a Gertrude Stein libretto of 1927; George Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess* (1935) adapts DuBose Heyward’s novel and consecutive play of 1926/27; and Louis Gruenberg’s *The Emperor Jones* (1933) is the musical version of Eugene O’Neill’s 1921 drama. Unlike in *Four Saints*, which does not concretely refer to American realities,¹¹ in the latter two violence is of utter importance.

*The Emperor Jones* was commissioned by the Met but failed. Gruenberg had begun to write in an “American style” in the 1920s,¹² and he incorporated in the score folk materials without becoming folksy. The drama had shown Jones, a greedy former Pullman porter and escaped convict turned cruel emperor of a Caribbean island, chased down by his subjects. Tom-toms reflect Jones’ increasing fear, beginning at the rhythm of his heartbeat to ever speed up until his death. Hallucinatory flashbacks envision his past as a murderer and as a slave
sold on the auction-block. In the end he is slain after having wasted the silver bullet that according to common superstition should have saved him.

Gruenberg's libretto made three alterations. For musical reasons Gruenberg began to use the tom-tom idea only by the end of act one. More importantly, he decided to make the pursuers' chorus rather than Jones' conscience his greatest tormentor. To an ostinato accompaniment it demands revenge in the introduction and intermission, and in the second act it is Jones' sole opponent. When Jones, in a third major change, retains a silver bullet to kill himself, Gruenberg turns him from passive victim into one who actively commits suicide. Thus in the opera Jones deserves at least some compassion. The violence he has afflicted and the violence he was exposed to comment on each other.

Even more relevant than The Emperor Jones is Gershwin's Porgy and Bess (1935). Gershwin had tried opera in the Twenties, e.g. in Blue Monday, of 1922, which deals with a killing by accident. But it is Porgy and Bess which is suffused with violence throughout. The black community at Catfish Row is riven between extremes: morning and evening, happiness and mourning, love and death. Gershwin never brings together the main characters of the drama, Bess, Porgy, and Crown, in a way Verdi would have done. Individual scenes are set against each other sequentially and their "episodic music reflects the varied nature of the stage action."

Naturalistically set in the near past, the community is isolated and ignorant, and prone to superstitions and foolery (the selling of divorces; Sporting Life's various tricks; Porgy's fear of Crown's corpse). It is also ridden by ethnic oppression (the behavior of the white detectives; the ongoing presence of former slaveholding families), and by drugs and alcohol. Nature is repeatedly featured with ominous storms and a killing sea. Poverty forces the men to go fishing under all weather conditions, and Porgy half-comprehendingly celebrates the union of material and spiritual hardship in his "I got plenty o' nottin'."

What softens the impression of despair is that the inhabitants are symbolically co-operating through the most popular song of the opera. Clara sings "Summertime" as a lullaby at the beginning, and the baby is again soothed by the tune when the storm which will kill its parents gathers. Bess takes up the song, and later Serena, whose husband had been killed by Crown, becomes the baby's next surrogate mother.
Caring for a new generation, Catfish Row will survive the disasters which constitute the opera.

Crown dominates the community – if necessary by killing, like in the opening scene, in which he stabs Robbins with a fishhook. He holds Bess dependent with the help of Sporting Life's "happy dust," through alcohol, and rape. She cannot withdraw from his and Sporting Life's powers even after having found temporary shelter with Porgy, the only character strong enough to oppose Crown. And Porgy, seemingly a loser for his naiveté and physical disability, and thus an emotional anchor for the spectator's sympathy, is hardly as naive as others think he is.

Much like in Mozart's *Don Giovanni* homicide opens the plot, and Crown's subsequent flight to Kittiwah Island makes possible Bess and Porgy's struggling for their love. He is a victim of circumstances, though. Teased for being drunk and too slow to follow the crap-game, he kills unthinkingly, and any of the gamblers could have been his target.\(^\text{17}\) It is Porgy's assassinating Crown which is outright murder, if with an element of self-defense. As early as in act II he plans to destroy his rival ("An' remember, when Crown come, that's my business, Bess!")\(^\text{79}\),\(^\text{18}\) and when Crown comes back to Catfish Row to collect her in act III, Porgy acts in cold blood:

> Crown enters the empty courtyard and picks his way stealthily across the court. Dropping to his hands and knees he crawls toward Porgy's door. Above Crown, the shutter opens slowly. An arm is extended, the hand grasping a long knife. The arm descends plunging the knife into Crown's back. The knife is withdrawn and hurled into court. Crown staggers upright as Porgy leans from the window and closes both hands around his throat. They struggle at the window, and Porgy kills Crown, hurling the body into the courtyard. (85)

There is nothing accidental about this, and Porgy "laughingly, triumphantly" states "Bess, Bess, you got a man now, you got Porgy." But Bess is gone. Sporting Life has lured her into leaving with him. Porgy has freed the community of an oppressor, but - back in excessive naiveté - he sets out to go to New York in his goat-cart.

Much of the violence in the opera is gendered. Bess is clearly a victim, as are Serena and Clara. But the women do not give in easily, especially when it comes to Sporting Life, who at least physically is less dangerous than Crown. Maria even "Grabs Sporting Life by the throat and picks up [a] carving knife" (66) and threatens him in a sadistic aria:
Somebody got to carve you up to set these peoples free
An’ de writin’ on the wall says it’s goin’ to be me
Some night when you is full of gin an’ don’t know I’s about
I’m goin’ to take you by de tail and turn you inside out.
Frien’s wid you, low-life, hell, no!
Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! I’s figgerin’ to break yo’ bones.
Yes, sir, one by one.
An’ then I’m goin’ to carve you up an’ hang you in de sun.
I’ll feed yo’ meat to buzzards an’ give ’em belly aches.
An’ take yo’ bones to Kittiwah to pizen rattlesnakes. (66)

Through acts like Porgy’s and songs like Maria’s, Gershwin breaks up distinctions between good and bad violence. No previous opera had gone so far in acknowledging physical brutality as a major trait of American life.

IV

During the Forties American opera would daringly break down conventions. Immigrant composers now could blend into established American traditions. The American opera in which violence probably is most prominent is Kurt Weill’s *Street Scene* (1947). Operatically its “urban verismo” is a transposition to modern America of the veristic opera of late 19th-century Italy, in which Puccini had played a role. Based on Elmer Rice’s play and with a libretto by Rice and Langston Hughes, it depicts a suffocatingly hot and humid day and night in a working-class street in contemporary New York. A wide range of characters from various backgrounds are marked through linguistic and musical means. Old-time operatic arias are set against Broadway-type tunes and passages of spoken text. The relatively isolated “numbers” in the opera reflect the isolation of its characters and the social fragmentation of the neighborhood.

None of the large number of interwoven stories is without some form of violence. The plot opens early in the morning by immigrant women gossiping and exerting tight social control over what happens in their street. They talk about an affair Mrs. Maurrant has with one Steve Sankey. Cries are heard from a room in which a woman is going through the labors of childbirth, and children are fighting – among them Mrs. Maurrant’s son, who has to defend his “whore” mother. Into this
little universe enters the outside world, when Rose Maurrant is torn between Sam Kaplan, a poor if promising young man from the neighborhood, and her boss, who tempts her to try a career on Broadway; for a kiss or two he would help her. Sam is beaten up by a boy who has sexually attacked Rose. Sam’s and Rose’s fathers argue about politics: Abraham Kaplan, a Jewish immigrant, tries to convince everybody that the “kepitalist press” distorts reality and that a revolution is pending. Chauvinistic Irishman Frank Maurrant’s answer is to threaten him physically:

Kaplan  All dis is bourgeois propaganda to take the minds of de verkers from de kless struggle.
Maurrant  All right, we heard enough. You better lay off that Red talk, or you’re liable to get your head busted open. (62)

When the child is born, it is the ominous Mrs. Maurrant who helps to deliver it, but she is rudely accused by her husband that she does not keep order among her own household and children. He leaves for an overnight work date, and Mrs. Maurrant is indeed visited by Sankey. But Maurrant comes back, finds them, and shoots both his wife and her lover; a common fact of life, the killing scene is not even set to music. Soon people, aroused by the press, come to view the location, like the two nursemaids wheeling baby carriages and singing a cruel lullaby:

First: Hush, baby hush,
Your daddy is a lush.
Shut your eyelids tight.
Second: He’s plastered every night.
First: No, darling, no.
Your mammy has a beau.
Snooze, little man.
Second: She cheats whenever she can,
Your parents are a loving pair;
First: He smacks her face;
Second: She pulls his hair;
First: Their shrieks and curses fill the air. (109)

Maurrant flees but is shot by the police and arrested. To Rose he confesses his love for his dead wife and acknowledges that he will be
sentenced to death on the electric chair. Losing both her parents that way, Rose follows the lure of Broadway into an insecure future.

The opera ends when the next morning dawns, with another scene of women gossiping and complaining about the weather. An apartment cleared by the sheriff (because the inhabitants could not pay the rent) has been leased again, and even for the Maurrants’ flat there is a couple waiting to move in immediately. This cyclic frame implies that none of the events is in any way unique.

Although most of the action is in some way connected with the Maurrant family, the wide range of violent situations – from losing one’s living quarters to murder – is a product of complex conditions, ranging from the weather through public prejudices and jealousy to the dream of a better collective or individual life. Explicitly, Weill subtitled his music drama an “American Opera,” and violence in it is omnipresent.

The composer’s *Down in the Valley* (1948) followed immediately after *Street Scene*, but marked a political change and a return to a more conventional format. Now that opera had become Americanized, a search began for a new operatic audience. Calling *Porgy and Bess* a “folk opera” had been misleading, as it was not based on pre-existing materials; now a type of folk opera was becoming fashionable which brought together easily recognizable material for the benefit and education of a greater public. *Down in the Valley*’s story and music were apt for school performances. Unlike in *Porgy and Bess* or *Street Scene* good and bad came to be easily separated again: The basic action is that a young man is waiting to be hanged at the gallows for slaying an older man who had indecently attacked his bride. He breaks out of jail to see her again, and then calmly waits to be arrested again and executed. In a series of flashbacks it becomes clear that he goes to his hanging knowing that his was a righteous cause.

Into the context of folk opera also fit Howard Hanson’s *Merry Mount* (1934), based on a Hawthorne story, and Douglas Moore’s *The Devil and Daniel Webster* (1939), an adaptation of a short story Stephen Vincent Benét had published in 1936. It is a tall-tale about the despair of a poor man of New Hampshire who, on a contract with the devil, gains wealth. When he realizes his impending death, he names Webster his legal aid. In front of a court made up of infamous historical Americans (among them Judge Hathorne), Webster wins an acquittal and drives the devil out to Massachusetts, where – ironically – he will be more
welcome. Much of the opera is prose dialogue, and its music mainly emphasizes emotion — tension, hopelessness, and (in a weird fiddle scene) lack of restraint. As the main character escapes from the pact with evil, the violence inherent in the opera is even more unobtrusive than in Down in the Valley.

A different kind of foreshadowing of the conservatism of the Fifties came through William Grant Still. His first attempts at opera were made in the 1920s, but it was only in the late Forties that his dream of an African-American opera came true in Troubled Island (1949). Still immediately saw its lack of success as the result of a communist conspiracy, even though Langston Hughes had been his librettist.

The main character is Jean-Jacques Dessalines, emperor of Haiti, who was murdered in 1806. The basic idea is not unlike that of The Emperor Jones, but Still's musical material is less innovative than Gruenberg's, and the plot is more conventionally organized than O'Neill's. Dessalines is not only an incapable ruler, he has also cruelly left his wife. Act I shows him before the Revolution, acts II and III depict his lack of leadership as an emperor, and in act IV he is murdered and mourned by his abandoned wife. In a revised ending, Still left him fatally wounded, so that the couple can confess their mutual love before he dies. Even more than in the earlier version, this is a return to the longish dying scenes of European opera in which love overcomes death. Although the opera addresses the question of black leadership, the remote time of action and the highly conventional plot prevent it from being a relevant contribution to contemporary problems.

Street Scene analyzed the omnipresence of violence in the American cities, and the folk operas tried to reunite ideological and musical populism by focusing on rural myths. But time was also ripe for a psychological analysis of how violence works. It was Marc Blitzstein's Regina (1949), a musical version of Lillian Hellman's The Little Foxes (1939), which interpreted this traditional operatic theme on the basis of a clearly American subject and musical language. Against the background of the dying culture and economy of the South at the turn of the twentieth century Regina Giddens plans to kill her husband Horace in order to get hold of the family assets and modernize the cotton mills to fit with the new capitalist order. In a scene dense with terror she refuses to give Horace medicine he needs. Her husband collapses and dies on-stage. In the end, not only the neighbors but also her daughter
Alexandra desert Regina. Her attempt at “modernization” fails, but she will fight on.

V

By the end of the Forties American opera had not only developed a tradition of its own, in works like Still’s there were signs that old patterns would be revived. The vast range of subjects that was at the composer’s hand is to be exemplified in four interactive fields: Opera in 1) an explicitly political context; 2) as an educational medium grounded in popular traditions; 3) in references to historic events; and 4) in creative uses of literary texts.

1) Gian Carlo Menotti’s *The Consul* (1950) reacted to the refusal of the American government to help World War II refugees. At the consulate Magda Sorel seeks to get visa for herself, her ailing child, and her husband John, a revolutionary sought by the secret police. A secretary cynically frustrates any attempt at contacts with the Consul and instead, in a Kafkaesque way, hands out innumerable forms. John is badly injured and eventually arrested, the child dies, and Magda gasses herself in the kitchen stove – not before finding out that the Consul and the secret police are co-operating. In the dying scene she envisions many a refugee to have shared her fate.

If *The Consul* was a moralistic outcry, Earl Robinson’s *Sandhog* (1954),26 based on Theodore Dreiser’s “St. Columba and the River” (1927), analyzed the working conditions of the laborers (“sandhogs”) who built Hoboken Bridge. By inserting spoken text and using a narrator and a workers’ chorus it refers back to propaganda shows like Blitzstein’s *The Cradle Will Rock* (1937). Due to poor safety regulations fatal accidents happen. When the bridge is opened, the dead “sandhogs” are passed over, but the narrator’s final vision compares the building of the bridge with the building of a new society.

2) Political opera was occasionally combined with folk opera, as in Aaron Copland’s *The Tender Land* (1955), which, using the setting of an isolated family farm in the Midwest, deals with xenophobia yet does not explicitly mention violent acts. More relevant here is Carlisle Floyd’s *Susannah* (1955). A biblical story is transferred into revival-ridden rural Tennessee, including references to Southern music. The community has excluded nineteen-year old Susannah, an orphan living
with her brother Sam, from their village because her beauty arouses the male inhabitants. When one day the elders, looking for a place for a baptism, come upon her taking a bath in a creek naked, they accuse her of threatening public morals; young Little Bat is even forced by his parents to lie that she has seduced him. Although the new preacher Blitch stages a meeting at the church for everyone to confess their sins in public (and the physical terror of the meeting is doubled by the intensity of images of sinners burning in the eternal fire of hell), Susannah refuses. The mood in the village is so menacing that Sam hands her a gun. Blitch, as lonely as Susannah, spends the night with her. Unable to concede his own sin, he at least wants to dispel the villagers' accusations against her. Susannah cannot forgive his bigotry, and Sam kills him. Sam flees, and Susannah symbolically slaps Little Bat in the face, making clear that she has withdrawn even from her few former friends. She decides to stay in defiance of all the hostility around her.

The basic story line – Sam shooting the preacher in revenge for seducing Susannah – is well-known in European opera. Yet the setting and conditions are completely American, as is the subject of a self-righteous majority versus deviant if morally innocent individuals. Susannah has grown in the process: Now an active fighter for her rights, she is no longer a mere victim but can act self-confidently and resist public opinion.

3) The historical format was chosen by Douglas Moore. But his *The Ballad of Baby Doe* (1958) has nothing of the playfulness of folk opera. Covering nineteen years, it also displays physical aging. The opera was conceived from the real case of Baby Doe, a former senator's widow who – incarnation of moral goodness – froze to death at a disused mine after her husband's death to rejoin him in a better life. Their love is preceded by unhappy marriages, and the senator's former wife arrogantly pursues them throughout the opera. In the final scene the dying ex-senator visualizes the decades Baby Doe will wait for their reunion. The plot opens on the frontier (like in Puccini a saloon, with gun shots and miners fighting), moves through the deceitful political scene of Washington D.C., to end back at the now impoverished mining camp. Violence is, apart from hatred and social prejudice, present mainly in the vicious "dog-eat-dog" economic and political mechanisms in the U.S.A.
4) Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story* (1957) picks up the strand of the literature-based musicals which had begun with *Show Boat*. It goes further in linking opera and musical not only through its tighter structure, but also in staging the brutal conditions underlying the murderous scene he and librettist Stephen Sondheim (himself an excellent composer) condensed and translated from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* into the New York gang wars of the Fifties.

The historic and the literary merge in Robert Ward's *The Crucible* (1961), based on Arthur Miller's play. Although Ward follows the drama quite literally, including the executions of John Putnam, Rebecca Nurse, and the pressing-to-death of Giles Corey, violence takes place off-stage, so that it is mainly its effects which are in focus. Ward reinterprets the Salem witch-hunts as not so much a political reminder of the dangers of intolerance, which Miller had in mind, but as a scene in the eternal battle of the sexes. Ward restores the traditional opera format, explicitly taking Verdi as one of his influences, yet uses a wide range of musical styles from medieval allusions to popular types of music of the present.

Ward, whose musical influences include church singing and jazz, used the European pattern quite purposefully, and Bernstein, who was most eminent as a conductor of nineteenth-century European works, saw no problem in composing in a format many an operatic purist would never find acceptable. In many ways American opera had come full circle, and in the process most conventions of the œuvre were first exploded and then reintroduced in altered ways. A different use of violence was of crucial importance as one factor in the process. The drawback was, though, that this fixation on American experiences restricted its international impact, and thus produced a new sort of American provincialism. From the 1960s onwards a post-nationalistic trend emerged in the musical dramas of Stephen Sondheim, the video operas of Steve Reich, or the highly stylized operatic works of Philip Glass and John Adams. Violence did play a role, but was less *typically* American. Yet this story is to be told elsewhere.
Notes


3 Summarized in Davis, vol. 2: 60.


8 Davis, vol. 3: 252.

9 In the novel the negative image of the river extends into the white world. It kills the Captain (who, in the musical, stays alive and well to the end), and, in Magnolia’s perspective, although the river is her “home,” it is “ruthless, relentless, Gargantuan, terrible. One might think to know its currents and channels ever so well, but once caught unprepared in the maelstrom, one would be sucked down and devoured as Captain Andy Hawks had been in that other turbid hungry flood” (Edna Ferber, *Show Boat* [1926; Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Crest, 1971] 157). The suffering of blacks is almost absent, and Jo (the “Joe” of the musical) is a musically-minded cook rather than a toiling workhand.

10 Dizikes 413 and 464; consequently, although New York was the hub for opera imported from Europe, American works are practically absent even from detailed analyses like Carol J. Oja’s *Making Music Modern: New York in the 1920s* (Oxford/New York: OUP, 2000).


13 Nisbett 224-227.


15 Cf. Martin 391.

16 Kobbé 244.
This is why some summaries skip the killing of Robbins; see, e.g., Wagner 234-235.

Quoted from the booklet to George Gershwin, *Porgy and Bess* (Decca 414559-2) 50-92.

Dizikes 506.

Quoted from the booklet to Kurt Weill, *Street Scene: An American Opera* (Decca 433371-2).


No recording is available, but the opera is discussed in some detail in Smith 187-192.

Cf. Smith 191-192.

See, e.g., Massenet's *Werther*.


Even further from the American present is Nicolas Nabokov's *The Holy Devil* (1958), which is set in Tsarist Russia and describes the psychological complexities around plans to murder Rasputin. Nabokov's choice of subject may have been topical, as he was a front man in the clandestine if state-run anti-communist cultural activities of the Fifties; cf. Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta Books, 1999).