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# America Happened to Me: Immigration, Acculturation, and Crafting Empathy in Rags

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An immigrant mother arrives at the border with only her child and the possessions she can carry. Whether she chose to leave her homeland for a chance at a better life or she was forced to flee persecution and violence, she left behind her community and her culture. However, in her memory and her body, she carries her traditions as tangibly as the most precious belongings. This story could be ripped from the headlines in 2024 about a woman at the southern border of the United States or be a tale about an expectant mother disembarking at Plymouth with a band of religious separatists from the seventeenth century. Whatever the setting, these women all have a common acculturation experience once they arrive: America begins to shape them just as they begin to shape America.

Upon contact with a new culture, immigrants begin to acculturate, choosing what traditions and behaviors to keep and what to discard. According to cross-cultural psychologists David Sam and John W. Berry, acculturation is an integration process that occurs in three distinct phases: "contact, reciprocal influence, and change." (1) This often-painful assessment process lives in the body as much as in the possessions, language, and clothing each immigrant evaluates as they navigate between the need to protect their heritage and the pressure to assimilate. For American immigrants, acculturation often centers around adapting to an ideal of Anglo-conforming "Americanness" and, for millions of immigrants, this process began upon arrival at Ellis Island.

In 1883, a group of Russian Jewish immigrants detained at Ellis Island inspired empathy in poet Emma Lazarus. Hoping to offer a more welcoming beginning at Ellis Island, she composed "The New Colossus" which reads:

Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door! (2)

Lazarus's evocative sonnet harnesses the powerful symbolism of the towering Statue of Liberty that greeted millions of Eastern European Jewish immigrants approaching Ellis Island, signaling that they had reached the land of freedom. (3) These intertwined pieces of art have long inspired Americans to empathize with the fate of immigrants who arrive at its borders.

Similarly, American musical theatre has taken up the project of developing empathy for the painful task of abandoning cultural traditions while forging an American identity. Musicals such as *West Side Story* (1958), *Rags* (1986), and *Hamilton* (2016) have interwoven story and song with evocative choreography to elevate the expression of the immigrant experience, creating a vocabulary of movement and a gestural language for the immigrant body. In her work, *Choreographing Empathy*, dance theorist Susan Leigh Foster asserts that empathy is a phenomenon that "connects humans to one another" and that choreography helps audiences connect to what a character is feeling so that they might better understand the character's emotional pain. (4) In coalescing with the plot, music, and lyrics, choreography magnifies the immigrant character's thoughts and desires, mapping their tension onto the actor's body and creating a visible and visceral spectacle of acculturation.

The original Broadway production of *Rags*, considered a flop due to its brief run of four official performances, provides an excellent illustration of musical theatre choreography—deployed here to tell an embodied story of acculturation—as a powerful tool to create empathy, motivating its audience to be more compassionate, engaged, and supportive of the American immigrant experience. *Rags* was created by Joseph Stein (book), Charles Strouse (score), and Stephen Schwartz (lyrics) as a follow-up to Stein's smash hit *Fiddler on the Roof*. The action begins at Ellis Island in 1910 and follows Rebecca Hershkowitz, a mother who has followed her husband to America for a better, safer life for her son. Like most

immigrant mothers' experiences before and after hers, Rebecca's transformation begins upon arrival, as she is challenged to find her way alone in a mysterious system of housing, employment, social relationships, and politics.

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Through a case study of the plot, score, and movement in the original production of *Rags*, this essay highlights how performers' bodies create and build tension through a confrontation of music and movement styles that echoes their characters' transition from Jewish immigrant to acculturated American. Jewish identity, as dance theorist Rebecca Rossen argues, is "a multilayered performance of repetition and invention" and "dance and the dancing body are particularly germane locations for providing theoretical insight into identity." (5) This choreographed tension around the loss of these characters' cultural traditions was impactful for me as a non-Jewish audience member as I watched the videorecording of the original production, and I argue that the detailed and accumulating embodiment of the painful immigration process in *Rags* crafted empathetic connections that have lasted long beyond my viewing experience. Despite the brevity of its initial run, the choreography of acculturation in this production illustrates the power of musical theatre to connect us to different cultures in ways that remain with us, shaping our understanding of and empathy for others as they wrestle with their own acculturative journey.

### Tradition(s): From *Fiddler* to *Rags*

Jewish ethnicity involves traditions based on teachings of the Torah passed from generation to generation. In American popular culture, the musical *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964), with Stein's libretto that centered on traditions at the heart of the Jewish culture, defined and even dictated broader cultural understandings of these traditions. Stein and his collaborators, Sheldon Harnick (lyrics), Jerry Bock (music), and Jerome Robbins (direction and choreography), cemented the musical theatre expression of three aspects of Jewish culture in the first moments of *Fiddler*: first, the role tradition plays in setting fundamental social expectations; second, the interpolation of traditional klezmer music into a Broadway sound; and third, an identifiably "Jewish" physicality in movement, gesture, and dance. Alissa Solomon asserts that a "special alchemy" among these aspects turned *Fiddler* into "folklore" and "a sacred repository of Jewish 'authenticity.'" (6) A brief examination of *Fiddler*'s opening number, "Tradition," delineates the Jewish cultural traditions still at play in *Rags*.

"Tradition" establishes the conflict at the heart of *Fiddler*'s plot, setting up gender role expectations and society's rules for marriage, appropriate dress, and business. Patriarchal milkman Tevye articulates the tension around these conflicts stating, "And how do we keep our balance? That I can tell you in one word. Tradition!....And because of our traditions, every one of us knows who he is and what God expects him to do." (7) Throughout *Fiddler*, modernizing forces test these traditions in both Tevye's home and the larger tightknit community.

In *Rags*, Stein stages the pressures and pain of the "double bind" many immigrants face choosing between maintaining tradition or assimilation. (8) His plot illustrates the three formal phases of acculturation and how the characters' values, attitudes, and behaviors change, resulting in four different outcomes identified by Berry and Sam: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. These outcomes reflect the degree to which each has embraced or rejected their original and new culture and their overall sense of belonging. (9) The acculturation story in *Rags* invites audiences to make empathetic connections as the central characters experience contact and reciprocal influence in the first act and more intense reciprocal pressure that results in change and belonging in the second act.

In crafting the *Fiddler* score, Bock relished the opportunity to explore his own cultural memories, claiming the musical about Russian Jewish shtetl life "opened up a flood of possibilities for me." (10) The ersatz sonic landscape he established in "Tradition," heavy with violins, clarinets, and klezmer rhythms, became the iconic musical theatre sound to evoke the Eastern European Jewish culture. Strouse had a similar connection to the material in *Rags* stating, "These were our grandmother's journeys." (11) His score echoes and builds upon Bock's work in *Fiddler*, purposefully fusing two musical idioms that were popular in America at the turn of the twentieth century, klezmer and ragtime.

Strouse also articulates the "Jewish" sonic identity in *Rags* through klezmer music, which had historical roots in Ashkenazi Jewish culture that migrated to America from areas throughout Eastern Europe but was considered "immigrant street music" by the 1900s. (12) He then utilized rags, the popular music of the era that was distinctly not imported from Europe, but rather originated in African American communities, to represent the "American" influences in the musical. The expressions of klezmer and ragtime music in *Rags* are theatrical realities, rather than literal expressions of the original forms of music, and are both filtered through Strouse's subjectivity and orchestrated to offer the Broadway audience a cultural memory rather than documentary accuracy. Strouse places these forms in concert with and in contrast to one another to establish cultural and ethnic sonic traditions. Through this fusion that extends Bock's work in *Fiddler*, Strouse creates and builds tension in a confrontation of musical styles that echoes the characters' negotiation of the transition from immigrant to acculturated American.

Finally, Jerome Robbins' choreography in *Fiddler on the Roof* establishes the gestural language for each familial character group in "Tradition" with communicative hand and arm movements that embody cultural traditions of Anatevka. Walter Zev Feldman asserts that gestures incorporating the hands and arms "formed a large part of the vocabulary of Jewish dance" and were a way that Jewish dancers expressed individuality and "sought connection to the divine." (13) In the opening number Robbins also utilized the circle, a prominent feature of Jewish dance, to establish the central metaphorical movement pattern for the production which would wind and unwind as traditions were affirmed or destroyed. (14)

In *Rags*, Strouse's eclectic fusion of klezmer and ragtime syncopations and melodies also inspired an evocative clash of "Jewish" and "American" choreography. Through carefully arranged "Jewish" and "American" gestures and accumulating movement patterns, the actor's bodies accrued culturally specific meanings and magnified the immigrant characters' thoughts and desires regarding their traditions and their acculturation process. These careful arrangements and meaningful structures, however, cannot be attributed to a specific collaborator on *Rags*, as the original production suffered from a lack of consistent directorial vision, cycling through several directors and even opening for previews in Boston without a director listed. (15)

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Compounding this frantic shifting, producers brought in Broadway veteran Ron Field to replace choreographer Kenneth Rinker three weeks before opening in New York. Since the choreography and movement cannot be assigned to either Field or Rinker, I must focus my analysis on the choreography of acculturation in the musical, including the vocabulary of movement they created, as well as the character work of the individual actors, that established a gestural language for the Jewish immigrant body. As Foster asserts, this immigrant body invites an empathetic response from its audience through a choreographed “system of codes and conventions,” that are expressed in “physical images” that convey meaning through the arrangement of parts of the body. (16) Utilizing Foster’s theories to analyze the choreographic coding of empathy in *Rags*, I examine three expressive areas of the performer’s body—the hands and arms, the feet and legwork, and the position or shape of the torso—to illustrate how the immigrant body is developed and articulated throughout the musical.

This study also expands Foster’s theories on the way dance “summons its viewers into an empathic relationship” by an inclusive evaluation of choreographed, gestural, and natural character movement utilizing these categories: body stances (open or closed), bodily shapes (erect or curved), timing of movements (slow or quick, continuous or abrupt), qualities of motion (restrained, sustained, or bursting), and relation to dimensional space (center, upstage, downstage). (17) By applying Foster’s analytical structure to immigrant identities and expanding the field of consideration to the actor’s characterization and movement, I argue that the compelling contrasts in stylized movement, in concert with the varied flavors of the musical score, build tension and define the Jewish characters’ immigrant identities in the choreography of acculturation through various stages of their struggles with tradition and change.

Jewish cultural traditions, like the ones set out in *Fiddler’s* “Tradition,” have proven instructive in the theatre, as enacting the painful process of melting away these defining practices while acculturating has created dramatic impact in plays from Israel Zangwill’s *The Melting Pot* (1908) to Paula Vogel’s *Indecent* (2015). *Rags* joined this lineage in the 1980s, as American popular culture reclaimed a narrative of American multiculturalism in a wave of nostalgia for the early twentieth century. Theatre theorist Henry Bial argues that Broadway began to see a phenomenon of playwrights focused on a “desire to reconstruct a lost or forgotten Jewish culture” that had been “denied them by their parents’ desire to assimilate.” (18) He argues that this “desire to remember” produced work that offered audiences “key elements of acting Jewish” and distinguishes more modern work “from earlier ‘Jewish revivals’ such as *Fiddler on the Roof*.” (19) Stein crafted *Rags* in this cultural moment to explore how core Jewish traditions adapted once they met the American melting pot, purposefully connecting within the musical’s title the rags of the syncopated musical style with the physical rags the immigrants wear. And, although the constant changes spelled disaster for the production, what emerges in the archival performance footage from 1986 is a coherent and complex synthesis of artistically embodied immigrant characters who dance with joy and pathos to Strouse’s score. *Rags* encourages empathy in its audience by illustrating the turmoil immigrants experience while acculturating, creating opportunities for viewers to be moved to be more compassionate to, engaged in, and supportive of the broader American immigrant experience.

### Contact with a Brand New World: Acculturation Begins

*Rags*’s creators begin crafting an empathetic response by artistically constructing the contact stage of the acculturation process, starting on Ellis Island where the Eastern European Jewish immigrants and Americans first make contact and then illustrating how the initial interactions during this phase can result in acculturative stress. (20) The central characters’ choreographic coding falls on a spectrum pinned by two starkly different embodiments, as both the Jewish immigrant and the American bodies are established in the opening number “I Remember/Greenhorns.” (21) These contrasting songs splice together two conflicting musical styles, and the physical staging of this sequence emphasizes the characters’ chaotic initial moments of transition from Immigrant to American.

In “I Remember,” Strouse’s music begins with the lush brass sounds of classical Americana which then turn harmonic, evoking a Eastern European mood as a “Homesick Immigrant” sings, “Sometimes we don’t love things/ Till we tell them goodbye/ Oh, my homeland, my homeland/ Goodbye.” (22) Aurally and lyrically, *Rags* establishes its focus on the internal emotions of more than two million Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe who arrived between 1880 and 1924, as the immigrants experience the confusion and homesickness that is typical of this stage of acculturation. The Jewish Immigrant physicality becomes discernable as they shuffle to disembark, clothed in ragged overcoats and carrying packages. (23) Although each character holds something different, a belonging, luggage, or a child, their body is the main vessel of what they carry with them – their history, relationships, religion, memories, and sorrow. They huddle together, establishing the core coding for the Immigrant body in *Rags*. This corporeal expression is characterized in Foster’s terms by a closed stance with torso collapsed, legs together, and arms bent to chest in a clutching motion. Their huddled shape is curved, with their shoulders thrust forward, functioning in the mode of “protecting” their belongings as well as their physical center. Even as the music and lyrics recall their beloved homeland, the still, strained quality of their bodies express their exhausting ordeal, and their huddling conveys their communal instinct to protect their children, their possessions, and their traditions.

Strouse’s sorrowful tune disrupts the scene with the catchy ragtime music of “Greenhorns,” which features clarinets, trumpets, and percussion in a polyrhythmic melody over a metrically regular accompaniment figure. Two Anglo-looking “Cynical Americans” in white suits, white shoes, and boater hats appear in spotlight. The men dance in a powerful spatial position at center, downstage of the mass of immigrants, hungrily observing, “Another load of greenhorns/ Fresh off the boat/ Another wave of refugees/ To fill the mills and factories/ A little grist/ For the capital system” (1-1-10). The men in white stand in stark contrast to the shadowy mass of bewildered immigrants in dark rags shuffling in line behind them.

These commanding men establish the active “American” physicality for the production, characterized by an open stance with their loose torso, arms, and legs. Their shape is erect with shoulders back and head up, evoking a sustained quality of ease in their movements that captures the essence of freedom they embody. The Americans’ movement timing is quick and continuous as they execute a simple combination of grapevine steps in unison while shaking their boaters, a playful style that evokes the most notable Yankee Doodle song-and-dance man of the period, George M. Cohan. Their heels jauntily scuff as they walk downstage, with small kicks and a wide lean, opening their arms and torsos to the huddled “Greenhorns” who are desperate for jobs. Filled with a sense of belonging, the Cynical American’s relaxed attitude and loose

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physicality indicates full assimilation into the culture. As the Immigrants join their last lyric, "We'll keep America green!" (1-1-10), the men stand together and swing their left arms open wide on "America," as if opening Emma Lazarus' mythical Golden Door for this latest flood of immigrants.

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As "Greenhorns" ends, Rebecca Hershkowitz, played in the original production by opera diva Teresa Stratas, emerges from the huddled mass with her ten-year-old son David, played by Josh Blake. Stratas was malleable as the beleaguered yet indestructible Rebecca at the center of the musical. At five foot tall with a "birdlike physique," she effectively performed frailty, but her powerful voice established her commanding presence and tremendous gravitas on stage. (24) As Rebecca, Stratas's first physical choices are emblematic of the "typical" immigrant: curved, collapsed, and shielding David. She experiences a specific crisis in the first stage of acculturation, looking expectantly for her husband, Nathan, who arrived in America six years ago. Rebecca is detained when Nathan does not appear, but an older passenger, Avram Cohen, accepts responsibility for her and her son.

Avram, his daughter Bella, and Bella's would-be fiancé Ben round out the core group of immigrants in *Rags* and offer audiences alternative versions along the spectrum of the Jewish immigrant physicality to follow through their individual acculturation processes. Dick Latessa plays Avram, the dignified and humble religious scholar, and chooses a closed stance and erect shape with his hands clasped in front of him, only opening his torso when he praises God. Avram is the intellectual community elder who vigilantly protects the traditional values and practices that define their Jewish faith, including rules for aspects of conduct in daily life, all with the goal of embodying in "everyday conduct the consequences of the revelation of the Torah." (25) Latessa's embodiment establishes Avram as the cultural cornerstone that each character trips over as they rush into choosing their American life.

In direct contrast to Avram, Bella is hopeful and in love with Ben Levitowitz, the brash, young, self-starter played by Lonny Price. Bella and Ben embody the youthful Jewish immigrant who is ready to embrace all America has to offer, even if that means abandoning Old World traditions. With his suit open, no hat, and no beard, Ben is "assertive and romantic," and Price's stance is wide open as he bursts onto Ellis Island with his arms extended in forward momentum. (26) Judy Kuhn's stance as Bella is tentatively open as she flits about, trying to contain her excitement. Avram informs his daughter, "He's not for you...He's cut from cheap cloth. Besides, a Jewish boy without a hat...Ah well, with God's help, we'll never see him again." Undaunted, Ben promises Bella, "I will find you in America!" before dashing off into his future (1-1-10).

The Jewish immigrants in *Rags* move swiftly through the confusion of the contact stage, exploring their new culture. Setting out for the Cohen family's tenement on the Lower East Side, they excitedly sing "Brand New World." However, during this phase, immigrants (in the musical and in life) also experience sensations of difference, including in dress, ideas, language, values, food, and clothing. According to Sam, the contact stage can transition to Acculturative Stress (sometimes likened to Culture Shock) which can result in disorientation and anxiety. (26) Finally alone after settling David in their cramped room, Rebecca takes a moment while her new reality sets in.

Although Stratas's diminutive figure is almost hidden as she crouches behind her suitcase, she projects Rebecca's intense fear. She protectively curves herself over Blake's sleeping body, singing, "Shasha, Shasha, Duvedel...We'll find papa, and we'll be/ Safe again at last, love.../ Like the Old World," a lullaby that is klezmer encoded with violins and clarinets in thirds (1-2-12). In the first of many musical confrontations that will open Rebecca's body and mind as she transforms into an American, Strouse interrupts her solitude with a stock ragtime figure wafting up from the street featuring a trilling synthesized sound like a carnival ride over which a piccolo and tuba continue the melody of "Brand New World." Transfixed, she sings, "What's that music/ Playing down there in the street?...So many noises, colors/ Mixed up and swirled/ Into a brand new world here" (1-2-12). However, David awakens, and the music returns her mind to her Old-World lullaby.

Before Rebecca can quiet David, Strouse's contrasting music cuts through again. Together, they absorb the sights and sounds of their new world from the tenement fire escape as the ragtime music begins to affect their immigrant physicalities. Here, Stratas and Blake play at "trying on" the American body with different stances, shapes, and qualities of movement. They slouch forward and lean on the railing, their bodies relaxed for the first time. David, who has little to protect and fewer traditions to preserve, blossoms into another youthful immigrant ready to embrace America with an open torso and outstretched arms. Rebecca, realizing that the encroaching outside world will change her son, is torn between restraining David or allowing him to experience the city. Stratas conveys Rebecca's choice to embrace their future as she stands behind Blake and mimics the gesture of the Golden Door the Cynical Americans made, opening the "New World" to David. As they sing in counterpoint, David grows more entranced and Rebecca more fearful of losing their connection to their traditions. In their final pose, Stratas's physicality evokes her emotional turmoil as she opens one arm as if receptive to this new world, but holds David close with the other arm, huddling protectively as the song ends.

The early portion of the acculturation process typically concludes with a difficult period as immigrants become frustrated with the choices they must make between their old and new cultures. At times, their experience can be humiliating, leading to depression and despair as they are forced toward change. In the original production of *Rags*, Rebecca reaches this breaking point after days of searching for her husband Nathan, becoming more and more vulnerable and realizing she will have to fend for her son alone. Recalling their harrowing escape from the violent pogroms and how David had been physically hurt, Rebecca is terrified.

Stratas heightens the magnitude of this moment by falling to the floor, creating a striking contrast with her crumpled body on a bare stage. As Stratas begins singing the musical theatre anthem "Children of the Wind," she is an extreme version of the huddled immigrant body almost prostrate on all fours. Foster notes that this pose "evokes a more primeval or earthly existence." (27) From this emotionally bereft spatial and physical position, Rebecca pulls herself up and embraces becoming an American. Stratas moves forward and rises with growing passion, motion that Foster interprets as indicating "progress and increasing significance." (28) Her arms remain clutched to her chest until she sings, "Bring us to the shore/ No more/ Children of the wind" (1-3-16). Stratas finishes the operatic crescendo on "wind" fully erect, with her torso and legs fully open and her arms extended. Her palms face forward to the audience, as though Rebecca is *not* pleading or begging, but rather connecting to

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and drawing strength from a larger entity that fuels her transformation in this new world. Stratas's final gesture makes the overall arc of the movement in "Children of the Wind" at once as simple and as complex as Rebecca's acculturation journey in America.

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With "Children of the Wind," *Rags*'s creators conclude the contact phase of Rebecca's journey with choreographic coding that blends the Jewish Immigrant body with the American body in a thrilling song, tailored to highlight Stratas's operatic talents. The plot, music, and movement coalesce in this moment, placing Rebecca in a position to move on without Nathan and embrace what America has to offer. This choreography of acculturation formulates, in Foster's terms, "an appeal to viewers to be apprehended and felt, encouraging them to participate collectively in discovering the communal basis of their experience," summoning the audience into an empathetic connection with the immigrant experience. (29)

### Reciprocal Influence: Old World, New World, Strange Harmonies

Once the characters have established their physicalized starting points, *Rags* builds on this emotional and artistic foundation to develop empathy as the Jewish immigrant characters move into the reciprocal influence stage of acculturation, where "both cultural groups affect the other's cultural patterns" economically, domestically, and socially. (30) During this phase, the choreographic coding of the Jewish immigrant body is in constant tension with the American body as the immigrants engage in the decision-making process of adapting while also maintaining connection to the integral parts of their heritage. Throughout this section, Strouse places klezmer and ragtime music in increasingly closer proximity, sometimes in true contrast and counterpoint, and the audience learns how the immigrants develop a sense of belonging by coping at work, exploring romance, and surviving violence.

As time passes, Rebecca and David find employment and adjust to their new community. The song "Penny a Tune" illustrates this transition as Rebecca stitches in a dress factory, David and Avram sell pots from a pushcart, Ben makes cigars in a warehouse, and Bella sews at home. The entire neighborhood sings, "Where folks are poor/ That's where music is rich/...At only a penny a tune," as three klezmer street musicians accompany the upbeat rhythm of their work (1-3-17). The musicians' appearance on stage is significant, as the klezmer sound and rhythm ground the Jewish characters in their ethnic traditions, even as their world expands. (31)

David acclimates swiftly, and the klezmer band shifts to a swinging ragtime rhythm and instrumentation as he sings out his peddler's spiel. Blake's new embodiment mimics the movements of the Cynical Americans, conveying that David has embraced his role and now moves at a ragtime tempo. This shift is highlighted by his pairing with Avram, who retains his closed, erect, and protective physicality. As David slips away from their reserved culture, Avram's dismay is amplified as the klezmer band's syncopated ragtime rhythms crescendo and now incorporate the klezmer sounds as well. The neighborhood sings, "Old world, new world, jumbled up in strange harmonies" in an overwhelming cacophony (1-3-27).

Although a klezmer band is playing, the Jewish characters either stand still or gently step touch to the ragtime rhythm. Once again, Strouse has placed the musical styles next to one another, but the neighbors' reticence to dance to these familiar sounds paints a vivid picture of their ongoing process of deciding to keep or abandon their traditions. The band underscores this cultural conflict as it returns to the raucous klezmer rhythm and melody, presenting the first opportunity for the *Rags* choreography to teach the audience about joyful Jewish expressiveness through additions to the movement vocabulary.

In response to the music, the crowd separates by gender, and the Jewish neighbors dance with an open stance, heads high, and arms up. Their quick synchronized steps and claps are a part of the folkdance traditions that remain in their memories and bodies. Some neighbors execute more intricate steps that Feldman notes are embellishments or variations on the conventional Jewish dance canon, linking arms and circling one another with open torsos and outside arms extended. In this circle dance, similar to a traditional *hora*, Feldman notes that "upper body movement was deemed essential for the cohesion and internal communication of the group." (32) This celebratory group dancing connects the spirit and the corporeality of these immigrants with the communal joy of the Old World's customs, while highlighting how much has been forgotten or already lost as they disperse from their tight-knit community and focus on work each day.

The immigrants also experience the reciprocal influence of acculturation as romance blossoms. Rebecca develops confidence as an independent American woman while at the dressmaking factory. She meets union-organizer Saul there, who introduces her to the Yiddish Theatre and radical activist Emma Goldman. One evening, Rebecca loses her inhibitions and allows Saul to kiss her. Afterwards, she sings "Blame it on the Summer Night," during which Stratas's embodiment of Rebecca changes, in stance, shape, tempo, and quality of movement. Stratas's relaxed and open body conveys that Rebecca is awash in conflicting emotions that, for the first time, do not directly relate to her very survival.

A klezmer musician accompanies Rebecca with a bluesy clarinet, as Stratas's swaying hips betray Rebecca's burgeoning sexual freedom. She spends most of the number leaning back on a low wall, with an open torso, closed eyes, and her head thrown back. Stratas's gestures are particularly expressive, with her hands on her throat and solar plexus, enjoying Rebecca's inner tumult. Rebecca claims, "I'm not to blame/ It's just the shameless summer night" (1-5-40). Stratas then dances and skips around the empty stage, flinging her arms overhead and swaying to the music. In this moment of acculturation, the music, lyrics, and movement intersect to support Rebecca's rejection of traditional Jewish cultural expectations of propriety and her defiant denial of blame for her actions. Only in the last moments, as Stratas slides from riffing in the blues idiom to an operatic trill, does the musician return to an authentic klezmer riff as he fades into the background. The choreography of Rebecca's developing embodiment of an independent American woman invites the audience to empathize with her as she embraces what now may be possible.

Meanwhile, in another budding romance, Ben visits Bella at the apartment and sweeps her up to dance an Irish waltz. She is shocked and delighted, as traditional Jewish communities forbade men and women from dancing together and maintaining "close physical contact." (33) With no dancing experience between their characters, Price and Kuhn hold hands while running in circles until they are interrupted by a

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astonished Avram who condemns this radical behavior. Avram accuses Ben of turning “his back on his people” to embrace America, and Bella flees the stifling apartment (1-6-48).

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Choking on the polluted air outside the tenement, Bella sings the song “Rags” while arguing with her father about their future. During the narrative portion of the song, Strouse’s music blends klezmer instrumentation, mainly clarinets and violins, with ragtime piccolo, brass, and percussion in a rhythm that bursts forth as Bella laments her lost sense of belonging and her frustration with being outside of the acculturation process she sees around her. Strouse’s music underscores the conflict she faces while living between two cultures but having access to neither.

Once Bella escapes uptown to an affluent neighborhood, the music changes to evoke the dreamlike state of an early Hollywood dance film. Couples in stark white suits and gowns surround her while dancing a balletic social dance called the Maxixe to an up-tempo ragtime rhythm that is reminiscent of Vernon and Irene Castle’s dance in the 1915 film *The Whirl of Life*. Carol Tétén describes the beginning of ragtime dancing as a wild expression of the New World’s freedom danced by both acculturating immigrants and the American elite. For both demographics, this new style reacted “against inhibited and restricted movements” and rejected “an antiquated lifestyle.” (34) This synchronized dancing is the first sustained choreography in *Rags* and serves to highlight Bella’s drastic marginalization from American culture.

The Castles, who were prominent dance instructors of the period, invented rules to refine ragtime dancing that “bridled the energy and enthusiasm fostered by the up-tempo music.” (35) The Maxixe in *Rags* follows the Castle’s technical and social standards which forbade (among other things) wiggling the shoulders, shaking the hips, and twisting, flouncing, or pumping parts of the body. They admonished their students to glide rather than hop and to “avoid low fantastic and acrobatic dips.” (36) These parameters, though somewhat restrictive, channeled potentially wild movements into an elegant and stylish dance.

In Bella’s fantasy, the dancers display the animated and erect torso of the ragtime style, and their heads and arms turn together as they change directions in sustained motion across the floor. Danielle Robinson notes that ragtime dancing fascinated young immigrant women like Bella for several reasons. First, the style “offered them access to a particular kind of Americanness...[through which] they affiliated themselves with whiteness...and obfuscated their connections with the foreignness that other Americans projected onto them.” (37) Second, ragtime dancing appealed because it “radically differed from Jewish folk dancing both in terms of social context and movement vocabulary.” Without friends and relatives watching, Robinson notes, the dancers could explore the “unparalleled expressions of sexual desire and pleasure [that] were made possible by the physical intimacy between dancing partners.” (38) Tellingly, Bella’s fantasy embraced the intimate and sustained means of communication between two free adults while rejecting traditional multi-generational, sexually segregated ethnic street celebrations like “Penny a Tune.”

Her dream fades as Bella spits out, “I’m the same as you/ but it isn’t true/ I’m just one more Jew/ in her rags!” (1-6-53). The contrasts within the staging of this sequence, from the fantastical white elegance against Bella in her rags to the highly stylized Maxixe whirling around her emphasized the disparity between Bella’s American Dream and her reality in class-conscious American society. These dramatic choreographic contrasts compel the audience to connect with Bella’s pain through, as Foster asserts, a “fundamental physical connection between dancer and viewer.” The choreography has constructed and cultivated “a specific physicality whose kinesthetic experience guides our perception of and connection to what another is feeling,” increasing the likelihood of creating empathy for Bella’s troubled acculturation experience thus far. (39)

Finally, Rebecca’s husband Nathan surfaces at the East Side Democratic Club as an assimilated American with political ambitions who is, as John Bush Jones notes, “vigorously denying his Jewish heritage.” (40) As Nathan, Larry Kert leans back on a bar stool with an open stance, smiling and drinking beer in a three-piece suit and boater hat, the very embodiment of a Cynical American. With his Tammany Hall-style cronies, he sings, “What’s Wrong with That?” which filters ragtime through the Vaudevillian idiom. These cronies, including “Big Tim” Sullivan, are not fooled by Nathan’s American camouflage and encourage him to convince recent immigrants of his “persuasion” to register as Democrats (1-7-57).

Nathan arrives in the Lower East Side as Rebecca huddles over David who has been injured in a street fight. Having returned to her original immigrant physicalization, Stratas reinterprets her lullaby to comfort David. Surprised to find them, Kert lifts them both, clutching them to his chest and revealing his own vulnerable, closed, and curved immigrant body. But, even as Nathan reconnects with his Jewish immigrant physicality, Rebecca asks him in disgust, “Where *were* you?” (1-8-63). The cataclysmic end to the act makes clear to Rebecca the dangers of assimilation into American culture and her role in resisting this process.

*Rags*’s creators detailed the characters’ experiences during the reciprocal influence phase of acculturation, illustrating how American society created pressure to assimilate and offered opportunity to grow in their work, romantic lives, and social connections, to further encourage an empathetic response in viewers. Throughout this stage, Rebecca’s values, behaviors, and identity were malleable, but she faced an instructive crisis when David, who had begun to assimilate, was attacked. As she returned to her huddled immigrant body and the Eastern European sounds of the lullaby, Strouse conveys her strong connections to cultural memory, and Stratas’s body expresses her core objective – protecting her child. By the end of the act, through the choreography of acculturation, *Rags*’s creators deliver Rebecca and her fellow Jewish immigrants to the brink of change, where they must decide how America will shape them and how they will shape America.

### Changing into Americans: Belonging and Legacy

The final movement of *Rags* summons the audience to an empathetic response to the immigrant characters during the last stage of acculturation, as they change into integrated, assimilated, separated, or marginalized Americans. Throughout this phase, the conflicting musical styles and physical expressions of identity continue to clash until several climactic events finalize their full transition from Immigrants to Americans. At this point, the central characters’ choreographic coding transforms into a stabilized interpretation of their adapted American body.

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Markers of change are apparent as the second act of *Rags* opens at a rooftop Fourth of July party, with exuberant ethnic dancing set to Strauss's wild klezmer music that is punctuated by ragtime music when patriotic fireworks burst. Nathan has dropped Hershkowitz and now introduces himself as "Nat Harris," an identity that horrifies Rebecca. She recoils at trying on this American name for herself, but he equates this exciting improvement with "getting new clothes" (2-1-66). Nathan, in his bid to be Ward Leader for the East Side Democratic Club, works the tenement crowd with an open, erect, and expressive American body shouting, "Nice to see ya" and shaking hands (2-1-64). To emphasize his full assimilation, Nathan sings "Yankee Boy," playing on the popular 1904 George M. Cohan Broadway musical *Little Johnny Jones*.

Kert's performance of "Yankee Boy" becomes a condensed enactment of Nathan's transition from immigrant to American, with his body as the site of contestation. He begins by imitating Latessa's reserved Avram physicality with a closed stance, his arms stuck tight to his sides and legs together. Kert shrugs his shoulders and brings his arm up along his torso and twists his wrist in two slight circles to complete the parody of a devout Jewish scholar. To underscore Nathan's distance from this embodiment, Kert's movements are broadly comic, disjointed, and abrupt. He then adapts the Cynical Americans' choreography from "Greenhorns," and David, the remaining potential legacy of Old-World traditions, enthusiastically joins the dance on "I'm gonna be/ A Yankee boy" (2-1-67). The Jewish neighbors tentatively march in place with their arms close at their sides, observing tradition. However, when Nathan and David sing "America the Beautiful," the neighbors parade down to the street as newly minted Democrats.

To accomplish his goal of living "Uptown" like "real Americans," Nathan convinces Rebecca that he needs money to buy finer clothing for the Democratic Club on election night. Rebecca hands over her entire savings, and Kert greedily hordes the money as he leaves her. Although she reaches after him, her physicality is not curved or closed. She is already solidifying her American stance and stands erect with the contrasting swell of the klezmer strings and wind instruments betraying the pain this choice causes her, as she reprises the Homesick Immigrant's tune, "Sometimes we don't love things/ Till we tell them goodbye..." (2-2-70). With acceptance that her old life is gone, Rebecca prepares for the final transition in her acculturation journey.

The East Side Democratic Party Rally is the culminating moment in the confrontation of music and dance styles in *Rags*. During this scene, Rebecca encounters more immigrants like Nathan who have abandoned, forgotten, or hidden their immigrant personas and assimilated as Americans. The intense pressure for Rebecca to assimilate produces a choreographic struggle at the rally that communicates the deeply rooted physical and emotional struggle immigrants experience as they choose what to keep and what to leave as they acculturate and find a sense of belonging.

First, Rebecca is tested on how she is adapting to American norms and values as "Big Tim" Sullivan, who has assimilated enough to become the Democratic Party Boss, addresses Rebecca as "Mrs. Harris" and encourages her to dance with one of his men. Her partner pulls her close, and Rebecca becomes a reluctant enactor of Bella's earlier ragtime dance fantasy. Stratas's syncopated imitation of her partner's Fox Trot is more suited to an ethnic dance, and she receives a scandalous slap on the upper thigh as a reprimand.

The precisely choreographed formal dancing mimics Bella's dream, with couples sailing about the room. However, Rebecca breaks off from her partner, and Stratas weaves through the crowd like the leader of a circle dance might, displaying quick footwork, open arms, clapping, and turning, the markers of Jewish ethnic group dancing seen earlier in "Penny a Tune." Feldman describes a leader creating "snake formations" breaking the circle "into a line moving in a single direction." (41) To curb Rebecca's act of resistance, her partner drags her back into line and overpowers her by throwing her back in a dip to finish the number.

As the dancers turn upstage to applaud the band, a spotlight isolates Rebecca who faces downstage, isolating her from the assimilated crowd. Stratas holds her arms above her head, clapping with a strongly opposing rhythm. She dances alone to klezmer music, with an open stance and strong angular arms raised in a display of power. Then, as she bows her head, her hands flutter down in the shape of an hourglass. This gesture is the only movement in *Rags* where an actor performs what Feldman describes as an artistic "communicative" gesture with the hands and arms. (42) By embracing her Jewish ethnic identity through movement, Rebecca reconnects with her past through the cultural and religious traditions she is expected to abandon.

As Rebecca's confidence in choosing her heritage over assimilation grows, Stratas moves center stage, lifts her skirts, and begins to incorporate her entire body into a traditional Eastern European Jewish dance. With her feet together, Stratas moves toe/heel/toe/heel from side-to-side, stomps, circles herself and draws in her dancing partner for coordinated deep knee bends that evoke Ukrainian Hopak dancing. Rebecca is so transported by her corporeal connection to her cultural traditions that it galvanizes the latent immigrant body in the other dancers who divide by gender, replicating the traditional format of the ethnic celebration in "Penny a Tune."

With Nathan and "Big Tim" Sullivan watching from the bandstand, the male dancers move to the klezmer music. Their bodies recall the traditional movements as they do athletic deep knee bends with their hands on their waists and then spring up to their heels with their arms extended, palms flat to ceiling. They perform high jumps with two feet flung behind their body, as one hand touches the soles of their feet and one arm is raised above their heads. Their expert choreography is technical, sustained, and up-tempo. By shrugging off their American identities, these former immigrants reconnect to their cultural roots.

However, the struggle continues as the music slides into ragtime rhythms, and the men shift to the "Chicken Scratch," a ragtime animal walk, that alternates high steps and low kicks with their arms creating angular "wings." (43) The women then take their turn as the klezmer music returns, building on the men's ethnic dance style. The groups continue to alternate with the clashing music and dance styles, moving back to their original partners and dancing in unison to ragtime music. The dancers turn to center, forming a large circle holding hands with backs to the

evoking the traditional *hora* dance. The group circles, kicking their legs high and rocking their bodies front to back, then return to the formal partner dance position.

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The chaos of switching between dance styles and the cacophony of clashing music not only physically and aurally expresses the pressure these immigrants feel to adapt to American norms and values, but it also engages the audience energetically in the culmination of the choreography of acculturation. The conflict within the dance creates the greatest tension in Rebecca's acculturation process, forcing an integrated rather than assimilated resolution to her journey. Stratas finishes the jubilant dance at center lifted by her partner with her arms raised in a strong "V" position. This physical image recalls her earlier pose at the end of "Children of the Wind," blending a refusal to abandon her cultural beliefs and an openness to embrace being an American. Visually connecting these two dramatic moments, one her breaking point and one her triumph, is the production's most effective climax for crafting empathy through movement.

As they finish, Sullivan shouts, "She's full of vinegar!" recognizing that Rebecca will be an asset who can touch the very heart of the community and bring people together (2-5-86). To Nat's delight, he is announced as the new Ward Leader. However, this joy is undercut by the news that Bella has died in a factory fire, invoking the infamous 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist fire that took the lives of one hundred forty-six mostly young, Jewish immigrant girls. This tragedy brings Rebecca to her lowest point since "Children of the Wind" and tests her sense of belonging as an American.

To mourn Bella, the creative team chose to incorporate the Mourner's Kaddish into the musical. The producers were concerned that audiences might find this interpolation offensive, but Stein, Strouse, and Schwartz insisted that the realist aspect was "essential" to the emotional impact of the scene. (44) They crafted "a semi-operatic duel between male and female mourners," with Schwartz setting transliterated lyrics to Strouse's music that reinterpreted the traditional melody of the Kaddish. (45) During the scene, Rebecca, David, and Avram cling together but never revert to the closed off physicality of the opening scenes of the musical, affirming that even this sorrow cannot crush their burgeoning American spirit. *Rags*'s creators crafted the musical's original dramatic climax to summon the audience's empathy for the immigrant characters acculturation struggle. The most marginalized character, Bella, suffers a tragic end, resulting in Ben's continued assimilation and Avram's deepening separation from American culture. After Bella's funeral, Rebecca quits her factory job, joining the Union organizers. She leads with a strong American stature but also loses Nathan. Confounded by her transformation, Nathan asks, "What happened to you?" Her simple reply, "America. I guess America happened to me," belies the cataclysmic struggle she has experienced (2-7-97). She ascends the Union platform, surrounded by a tableau of American bodies with open torsos and arms extended in unity and power, and reclaims herself as "Rebecca Hershkowitz." This final sustained, open, and erect gesture expresses the balance she now feels as an integrated Jewish immigrant who will not abandon her cultural heritage but embraces her new identity.

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In 1985, Stein wrote, "*Rags* is a story of one woman forced to flee with her son to America and a safe life. She doesn't find it. Instead, she finds the pleasure-pain of involvement and the price we often pay in caring for others. These others pry open doors within us that allow us to recognize what we are and mold ourselves into something new and wonderful." (46) *Rags*'s creators purposefully crafted empathy by coalescing the plot, score, and movement, recognizing that empathy for immigrants is important, both as a social ideal and for personal growth. Through a screen decades later, the embodied empathy of the choreography of acculturation was still affective, and their ideals have sustained multiple revisions and revivals of the musical for almost forty years.

Losing cultural traditions while becoming American is painful and, as sociologist Kris Kissman notes, developing empathy for this process increases the likelihood of building positive relationships with our students, co-workers, and clients who have experienced immigration. This work may include recognizing difficult immigrant experiences, respecting language preferences, or patiently accepting how much time the acculturation process takes. (47) However, developing the empathetic response grows increasingly difficult in a deeply divided and ultra-mediated America. The arts, and specifically musical theatre through its combination of visual, aural, and visceral impact, can craft powerful work by staging the embodied stories of others that invites and provokes audiences to make empathetic connections that remain long after the performance ends.

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