

Still Here? Aging Female Vocalities in Musical Theatre

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Abstract

Musical theatre has a complex relationship with aging (and especially female aging). As youth has always been at the forefront of musicals, essentialist approaches to aging in articulation and enactment of aging musical characters often lead to aesthetic peripheries and creative stagnation. Aiming for a deeper understanding of how female aging vocalities are perceived, dramaturged and performed in musical theatre, the article discusses perceptions and dramaturgical representations in musicals and takes under consideration viewpoints from aging female performers who work at the centre of the musical theatre industry (Broadway and The West End). Situated at the intersection of interdisciplinary voice studies and musical theatre studies while also drawing from age studies and music studies, it examines, under the lens of intersectional feminism, two aging female characters: Madame Armfeldt in the musical *A Little Night Music* and Grandma in *Billy Elliot the Musical*. This study stems from a four-year doctoral project which has proposed the conceptual framework of *the aging female voice as pharmakon* in musicals, in order to further understand how the aging voice oscillates between progressive and regressive elements embodied and enoiced within each of the roles examined.

KEYWORDS: musical theatre, voice studies, aging female vocalities, *Grandma*, *A Little Night Music*, *Billy Elliot*.

This is the song in every show,
 That no one likes because it's boring,
 A song like 'Sentimental Man' [...] or, 'look! that woman is almost snoring!' (1)
 [...] My range is limited and so the next three minutes will pass slowly.
 So, if you have the tiniest suspicion that you should have peed
 When it was intermission,
 Now is the time, you won't miss much –
 Oh, wait! Here comes my... sort of....
 (*sings in a fifth interval up with a frail voice*)
 High noooooote!

Introduction

In December 2019, comedian Sarah Smallwood Parsons composed a musical number called 'That Song in Every Musical That No One Likes' which she performed in the monthly UCB show *The Best of Characters Welcome*, a show that brings together comedy actors to perform original characters and impressions. The song was about aging Broadway performers ("who wanted a role where [they] get to sing but [they] also get to sit down a lot") and the reasoning for the existence of such songs in musicals: "the leads are backstage changing, and they need a lot of time".

Musical theatre—this popular, artistic, and multi-faceted genre of theatre that "questions and explores the dynamics of our lives" (Taylor and Symonds 2014: 2)—"can in fact serve as a bold commentary on aspects of society" (Sternfield and Wollman 2020: 1). Like popular music, which "is often perceived as dependent upon communities of youth to propel and invigorate fan bases and styles" (Taylor 2012: 39), musicals are critically hinged on centralisations or, even mythologisations, of youth.

British theatre director Marianne Elliott, recipient of three Laurence Olivier Awards and Tony Awards, expressed in an interview for *The Stage* her view that "older women are regarded as not valuable, they've always been thought of in that way, as something to laugh at" (Masso 2019). English actress Julie Walters has repeatedly emphasised that there are not enough roles for older female actors (2011; 2012) and has criticised how theatre, in general, appeals "to youth [as] the only way forward" (Trueman 2012). Rosalie Craig has expressly called for more lead roles for older women and American musical theatre actress and light-lyric soprano Melissa Errico wrote in *The New York Times* in 2016: "The truth is that women in musical theatre still tend to be segregated: romantic innocents or worldly dames. Where is the elusive middle? What roles are there for actually aging, still human women? Very few come to mind".

Despite the growing body of research on aging in relation to theatre and cultural studies, the existing musical theatre literature focuses mainly on thematic categories such as chronology and historiographic context, musical theatre composers, analysis of musicals, dynamic relationships between song and dance, as well as pedagogical/teaching guides regarding writing, composing, and directing

musicals.(2) While most of these significant and, in many cases, ground-breaking bodies of work have) opened new horizons for the critical examination of musical theatre and consolidated it into an academic field on its own, the representation of aging female vocalities within the dramaturgies and performances of musicals has been consistently overlooked.

Stemming from a four-year PhD research, this article is situated at the intersection of interdisciplinary voice studies and musical theatre studies, and looks into the artistic and creative vocal presence of female aging in musical theatre through the lens of intersectional feminism. Drawing on performance studies and age studies, it casts an urgent, timely light upon a discourse that has long been overdue, and develops original discussions on (voiced) female aging as it intersects with class, regionality, and sexuality. The research draws from German cultural critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin's (1968) writings regarding works of art and their reproductions, and understands the particular roles/case studies as "auras"—"the unique phenomenon of distance, however close it may be" (222) which represents "the formulation of cult value of the work of art in categories of space and time perception". The auras that emanate from a role "cannot be separated for the spectators from that of actor[s]" (229), tying the role to the actor. Following this line of thought, and considering voice as a process (Thomaidis 2017), the study brings together the aging character and her performer in an integrated approach that looks not only into the representation of the character as it was written by her librettist, lyricist and composer, but, also, into the distinctive qualities and ideologies generated within the character's original performance and reproductions in different sociocultural contexts (Broadway, US; The West End, UK) and through diverse time periods.

Aging, irrespective of normative systemisations of time, is a process of changing. The term, I argue, offers a more considerate, inclusive, and respectful narrative that considers biological *and* sociocultural changing. It has been selected over other social names (such as old, older, elderly, aged) to function as the article's ideological umbrella under which varying perceptions of lived time can coexist without imposing or unintentionally foisting negative concepts of gendered materialities. In that sense, aging becomes "a matter of degree rather than a fixed identity" (Showalter 2013: xi) and it is used in alignment with feminist Professor of Psychology and Gendered Studies Lynne Segal's discussion of the paradoxes of aging: "as we age, [...] we also retain, in one manifestation or another, traces of all selves we have been, creating a temporal vertigo, and rendering us psychically, in one sense, all ages and no age" (2013: 4).

"Vocality" is used throughout the article as it engages more clearly and constructively with all interrelations between cultural studies, voice studies, performance studies, and musical theatre. The way the term is used aligns with Dunn and Jones' seminal work on female vocality in Western frameworks (1994) in which they highlight that "moving from 'voice' to 'vocality' [...] implies a shift from a concern with the phenomenological roots of voice to a conception of vocality as a cultural construct" (2). Vocality, then, becomes "all of the voice's manifestations [...] each of which is invested with social meanings" (1). The article draws from Thomaidis and Macpherson's acknowledgement of the plurality of voice and their concept of 'the voice-in-between', "the junction point for multiple encodings of experience to be negotiated and understood" (2015: 4). Thomaidis

and Macpherson locate this “in-betweenness” of the voice in the process of creative practices (such as composition, dramaturgies, vocal training), the performance of “musico-theatrical practices” (5), and the “multi-modal engagement with voice in process, in practice and in performance” (6). By understanding and acknowledging that the phenomenological experience of the aging female body-voice (or: embodied voice) needs to intersect with semiotic and ideological context, this study is inspired by the “voice-in-between” and delves into the *vocal-in-between*: in-between production and reception; in-between characters and performers; in-between performers and their audiences. As a consequence, I focus on production and reception, and the aging female vocalicity in musicals is always present and apparent: between voice and lyrics, between voice and music, between voicer and listener, between voice-in-production and voice-in-reception, between the creators’ reception of voice and the performers’ reception of voice.

Aiming to unravel, explore, discuss, and embrace this voiced in-between, the joint methodology brought together tools from musicological analysis (score analysis, analysis of orchestrations, music semiotics), performance ethnography (live performances and audio-visual recordings), archival work, close analysis of the librettos, and phenomenological approaches of characterisations and the body-voice in performance. Interviews with aging female professionals in musical theatre allowed polyvocal meanings to emerge and lived experiences to be discussed. These interviews foregrounded such voices and opened a path for the aging voicers to discuss their understandings of their vocal changes related to aging and musicals.

Archetypes and Lived Experiences in Musical Theatre

Musical theatre has a history of developing characters by drawing from archetypes and stereotypes, and there are lengthy discussions around the types associated with young females in which “physical beauty and a soprano singing voice [are] the staples of the heroine” (Hanson 1997: 13). (3) Some examples are *the ingénue* (the light lyric soprano voice; often referred to as the “leading lady”) and *the soubrette* (any mezzo-soprano; sometimes referred to as “character actor”), both being young female characters connected with romantic and flirtatious themes. Aging female archetypes, however, almost always carry negative connotations. These include stock characters from Commedia dell’arte such as *La Ruffiana* (an old woman and a former prostitute, usually shady and gossipy who sometimes appears as a gipsy or a witch) and the *Old Maid*; characters that derive from folklore and fairy tales such as *the Shrew*, *the Crone*, *the Hag*, *the Witch*; and other stereotypical models of sociocultural classifications such as *the Battle-Axe*, the elderly eccentric and vain *Grande Dame*, and *the Spinster*, who “like a witch [...] serve[s] to embrace and isolate a group of women of vastly different dispositions, talents, situations” (Haskell 1988: 18). (4)

As American musical theatre has been connected and heavily influenced by Yiddishkeit (trans: all things Jewish) and Jewish culture, traits of Jewish aging female stereotypes were absorbed into their aging female musical characters: the love-to-hate Jewish mother, the wealthy widow, and the “roly-poly bubbie – the Eastern European grandmother who is happiest in the kitchen” (Groves 2014). Yet, even if there is a complex interplay of cultural beliefs, historical convention, repertoire,

and ready-made characters, the fact remains: composers, librettists, and lyricists have created or perpetuated specific attitudes towards female aging characterisation, treating their aging women with sexageism. (5) More than often, these characters are either malicious and dangerous, or comedic-side roles, indifferent to the male gaze and, consequently, male ear.

During casting procedures, it seems that 'older' women are viewed as deteriorating at fixed chronological points, with their vocal abilities often being overshadowed by their aging looks. Characteristically, *Stage Agent* categorises casting ages for musicals in quite an unmistakable way. All ages between 26 and 50 are considered "adult", ages between 51 and 74 are listed as "mature adult", and ages 75 and above are in the "elderly" category. Besides the fact that such industry-oriented, unquestionable casting categorisations come to impose specific standards and expectations on aging female vocalities (making performers question their validity and impact), the term "elderly" is now considered ageist and patronising. (6)

During my conversations with performers, I realised that in terms of casting, many were caught in a "temporal vertigo" (see Segal 2013) where they found themselves between the visual/social psychology of female aging and the musical theatre's politics. Characteristically, a British musical theatre performer (who would like to keep her anonymity) shared with me:

Once having in their mind how old you are, that's all they see. I would say that I look about ten years younger than I am. I have a constant fight with my agent. She knows how old I am, and she constantly puts me forward for wrinkly old ladies. And I don't get the parts! I don't get the parts because I don't *look* that old. And I can't get the younger parts once I reveal my age because they won't let me audition. (2019).

The specific actress experienced the paradox of "all ages and no age" (Winnicott 1986; Segal 2013): in the first instance, once she reveals her biological age, she is immediately considered for a specific type of role, but still, she is not allowed to audition because she looks much younger than the physical description for the role; in the second, to try to audition for a younger role means that she cannot reveal her biological age.

Vocal Aging

Regarding the aging of the voice and, specifically, the female voice, it is necessary to briefly look into scholarly research on the physiology of the vocal apparatus and the biomedical and aerodynamic correlates of the aging female voice mechanisms. By the age of 65, the laryngeal skeleton (where the vocal folds reside) ossifies, and the body's sex hormones, progesterone, testosterone, and oestrogen influence the larynx and the vocal tract of aging women during and after menopause. Furthermore, the vital capacity of the lungs, which is the amount of air used to support breathing, speaking, and singing, reduces, and so does the ability to hold longer notes. Combined with oesophageal reflux symptoms due to the slowing down of the digestive system, this biological aging leads to voice changes, such as loss of brilliance and power, dryness, lowering of the fundamental frequency,

decreased ability to reach high notes, and vocal fatigue. The qualities of the aging voice's physiology are observed tendencies of the use of a lower register (vocal fry), which adds a quality of roughness to the voice, fewer syllables per breath, higher incidence of voice breaks, prolongation of vowels, and sometimes tremor (McGlone and Hollien 1963; Pontes et al 2006).

It is worth briefly mentioning a few observations regarding Disney's most recent utilisation of the aging female voice branded with interconnections between stereotypes on aging and the performance of evilness. The musical film, *Disenchanted* (released by Disney+ on November 18, 2022), with music by Alan Menken and lyrics by Stephen Schwartz, arrived fifteen years after its predecessor, *Enchanted* (2007). Set ten years after the initial story, it features the same cast in the leading roles. Amy Adams plays Giselle, a typical ingénue role—the naïve and optimist protagonist—and is, in this sequel, 48 years old. The production has maintained the same vocal delivery standards (legit, light lyric soprano voice) *until* the moment that Giselle accidentally finds herself under a curse and turns from the *Cinderella* archetype of the first film (see Laird, 2017: 69-70) to the evil (aging) stepmother, becoming one of the story's villainesses. This transformation is built on the co-dependencies between existing archetypes in musicals and Disney's established stereotypes of "female villainesses who exhibited many negative stereotypes of aging" (Perry 1999: 203). Adams has looked into the vocal deliveries of Disney's aging female evil characters (such as Cruella de Vil, Ursula, Maleficent, Mother Gothel) (Adams in *Good Morning America*, 2022): she emulates vocal aging characteristics not only to perform age with her voice but, also, by doing so, to portray the vain, passive-aggressive, twisted (aging) character, linking aging to evilness. The vibrato in her singing disappears while she switches from her legit soprano delivery to a flat-tone, alto-vibe recitativo style with an observable change of the fundamental frequency and an audible loss of brightness and power. The same 'toneless' vocal approach applies to the other villainess of the film, Malvina Monroe, the snobbish housewife who turns into the wicked witch/queen, performed by the 50-year-old Maya Rudolph. In her songs, Rudolph uses a speaking voice in rhythm rather than her actual singing voice. The juxtaposition between what is stereotypically perceived as a young and an old performative voice is, rather provokingly, over-emphasised by the film as the dramaturgy relies on the aging of the voice rather than the aging of the visual to communicate evilness.

Madame Armfeldt and her "Liaisons"

Back in 1973, the all-star Broadway team of Stephen Sondheim, Hugh Wheeler, and Hal Prince, were looking for an aging actress to realise the supporting role of Madame Armfeldt, the 74-year-old retired courtesan and judgemental mother in their new production titled *A Little Night Music*. The musical was based on Ingmar Bergman's 1955 cataclysmic boudoir film-farce, *Smiles of a Summer Night*. With its diverse concept of "the three smiles of the night", an innovative dramaturgical and vocal exploration of three different stages in life, the musical was aiming to compensate for the financial loss of *Follies*. The role of Madame Armfeldt was (and still is) an important contribution as it offers/offered the rare opportunity for female performers over seventy to act (again) in a musical. English actress Hermione

Gingold (1897-1987) with a voice that has been described as “powdered glass in deep syrup” (Gingold 1989), was called for a try-out. (7) Gingold was no stranger to playing retired courtesans: sixteen years earlier, she had played the supporting role of Madame Alvarez in Minelli’s musical film adaptation of Colette’s *Gigi* (1958). Glimpses of this particular audition have been shared both by Gingold in her autobiography, *How to Grow Old Disgracefully* (1989), and Sondheim, in his *Finishing the Hat* (2010). Gingold, among other details, has highlighted the fact that although she was exactly the same age as the character, she was not perceived as such:

[T]hey weren’t sure I could age enough to play the part of a seventy-four-year-old woman. ‘But Mr Prince,’ I told him, ‘I *am* seventy-four. (1989: 199, original emphasis).

Sondheim has offered a full-on, tour-de-force claim of the role’s age:

I murmured deferentially that we knew she could sing but that we needed to hear her vocal range (an excuse to hear whether she could sing or not), she offered to ply us with a music hall song, a cappella. Which she did, charmingly. She then read a couple of scenes with the stage manager – with, unexpectedly, genuine verve and autocratic condescension. [...] She then added, “I notice that in the script, Madame Armfeldt is seventy-four years old. Coincidentally, gentlemen, so am I. I also noticed that when she dies at the end, the stage direction indicates that her wig slips a bit off her head. Well—” And with that, she lifted off her wig, revealing herself to be completely bald. As the clang of three jaws hitting the floor died away, she thanked us once again and left the stage. We decided to give her the part before she left the theatre. (2010: 263).

There are yet some salient points in these narrations that need to be further unpacked. Gingold reports that Prince and Sondheim’s sole concern was if she “could age enough” to play Madame Armfeldt. There is obscurity in this statement, as “ag[ing] enough” does not elucidate if it referred to the visuality of her aging body, the aural reception of her aging voice, performance energy (movement on stage) or, holistically, to the performer’s vocality. What is evident, however, is that Sondheim and Prince, two men in their forties at the time of the audition, overlooked the fact that the established performer auditioning for the role was, in reality, *at the exact same age* as the character they wished to develop on stage. Was it, perhaps, that their visualisation of how a 74-year-old character should look or sound impinged on their ability to welcome an *actual* (and physically present) representation of that same age? It might have been that Gingold, ultimately, did surrender her aptness to age successfully, in exchange for the role: she revealed her aging body unvarnished, disclosing a visual that favoured Madame Armfeldt’s envisaged looks: her wig for the character’s wig. Equally plausibly, though, might have been that when Gingold realised that the creators of the aging character shared a false perception of how a 74-year-old lady should be, she demonstrated, in an almost activist way, that their dramaturgy was a lesser version of the lived reality: she was a *vigorous* 74-year-old woman whose wig was not a trademark of decline but a symbol of looking forward in life as well as back. If the acclaimed actress, who has given life to Madame Armfeldt in 601 performances on Broadway, a

revival in West End and a film adaptation, and who, according to the casting director Shirley Rich, has “turned [the role] into her own” (in Zadan 1974: 123), had not decided to expose her body in this way, she might not have given life to a Madame Armfeldt that inspired many interpretations of the role in the years that followed.

The character of Madame Armfeldt is a retired courtesan: an extraordinarily beguiling and witty woman. Historically, the ways male writers have illustrated courtesans and their lives in literature or plays are utterly contrasting with the way courtesans themselves have written about their position in society and their lived experiences in their autobiographies. Courtesan authors endeavoured to “carve a place outside of a discourse dominated by male writers” (Sullivan, 2016: 3), representing themselves “as renegade women free to write, think, socialize, dress, and spend as they please” (4). By re-telling and re-inventing Bergman’s Madame Armfeldt, Sondheim, Wheeler, and Prince had the remarkable opportunity to create a multidimensional aging character; a strong, independent, and caring aging woman who had “numbered kings among her lovers” (Wheeler and Sondheim 1973: 15) and whose “liaisons” with male aristocrats have led to the riches she has now. Yet the aging courtesan is illustrated as a stereotypical, conservative, high-class aristocrat who has nothing in common with the demimondaine’s understanding of the world she lived in. Confined in a wheelchair, or “hobbling on a stick” (Gingold 1988: 202), severed from her erstwhile sexuality, she is portrayed as an insentient *outsider* clinging to anachronistic ideals. Although the world of love is *her* domain and familiar territory, all other characters in the musical are actively involved in interweaving love stories while she is framed in a degrading and withered body; a body in denial; a *symptom* that she does not wish for others to experience: “To lose a lover or even a husband or two during the course of one’s life can be vexing. But to lose one’s teeth is a catastrophe!” (Wheeler and Sondheim 1973: 113).

Songs in musicals define their characters, and *A Little Night Music* adheres to this fundamental paradigm, offering “I am/I want” songs that describe each character’s deepest thoughts. “Liaisons” is Madame Armfeldt’s solo song: a lament for the ways new generations of women choose to be involved in sexual and romantic relationships. “Liaisons” is written in the musical form of a Sarabande (3/2 metre) and at a Moderato tempo. The choice of Sarabande’s slow, stately, court-dance form in triple metre (widely found in Baroque suites during the 18th century) as the base for Madame Armfeldt’s signature song not only befits the character’s social class and elegance but also serves as a subtextual commentary on the character’s past. Musicologist and musician Rose Pruiksma establishes associations between the theatrical performances of a Sarabande and the Spanish *zarabanda*: a dance with “sexual responses” (2008: 150) which bequeathed to Sarabande its “persuasive and passionate nature” (152). For French dramatist Georges de Skúdery, the true seduction in the dance is the “dancer’s ability to move against” the “stable rhythms and regular phrasing of the music” (in Pruiksma 2018: 151). Madame Armfeldt’s frail physical state maps an antithesis to her sung dance, and becomes a dramaturgical device of oppositions: her seductive past moves against the stable, almost immobile, rhythm of her present.

The verses of the song are divided between reflections of individual scenes/memories (the villa of the Baron de Signac, the palace of the Duke of Ferrara, the castle of the King of Belgians), commentaries, and criticisms by the character. In playing with intervals, rising and falling musical phrases, and words, Sondheim created a musical soliloquy for Madame Armfeldt in which she reveals her values, and she laments their absence in the modern world. Utilising rhyme to “sho[w] intelligence and a controlled state of mind” (Sondheim in Zadan 1974: 218), when the character’s narrative is accurate, and with references to names and places, the rigorous and heavy rhyming binds together the eloquently rich and expressive lyrics with the melody and the rhythm; this presents the controlled state of Madame Armfeldt’s mind. In contrast, in the parts of the song where the character experiences “senior moments” of forgetfulness, the rhyming becomes much looser. Madame Armfeldt’s rhyming appears to be in and out between the parts where she sings about her memories and the parts where she struggles to maintain her train of thought.

The character’s voice concludes on an F₅ sung on the middle syllable of the theme word “liaisons” (-ai...) which remains unfinished as Madame Armfeldt falls asleep while she sings: the orchestra, then, leads the song to its end. This compositional device could be seen as a true devotion to the musical structure of a Sarabande: Furetière’s dictionary states that “the exotic desire of a Sarabande finishes in lifting” (the hand) (in Pruiksma 2018: 151), and in a similar fashion, Madame Armfeldt’s Sarabande remains vocally “up in the air”. Taking under consideration that Sondheim recommends that the last word in a song needs to be singable (“It’s best to end with an ‘ow’ or ‘ah’ – open sounds that the singer can go with” [in Zadan 1974: 221]), the surgically severed last “liaisons” in Madame Armfeldt’s song equips the performer with the middle syllable (ai-) for a grandiose ending, leaving his “best” dramaturgical device for the end (and in line with perceptions of aging at the time: the old woman falls asleep).

“Liaisons”, with its constant narration of scenes and events, is not an easy song to remember. Gingold found the number “one of the most difficult songs” she knew, because “it was very long” and she could “hardly ever remember which man [she] had when” (Zadan 1974: 206). Even in the musical’s revivals, years later, the aging performers who realised the role faced similar problems. When Elaine Stritch (1925-2014) revived Madame Armfeldt at the age of eighty-five in 2010-2011 (a role that proved to be her last in musical theatre), critic S. Holden addressed the issue of Stritch forgetting lines: “[T]he obstacle facing Ms Stritch is her failing memory for lyrics and patter” (2011).

Hal Prince has recalled the reasoning of the production team when deciding how to stage “Liaisons”:

We also had to decide how much to allow Hermione to move. How could that lady who’d been in a wheelchair all night suddenly get up and dance? In *Night Music* she *couldn’t*! It’s not the kind of show where you suddenly go crazy, and some old lady gets up and looks adorable. None of us wanted a case of the cutes. At one point I had Hermione waving a cane around, doing a few jaunty steps, which she adored, but it was disgusting because it had nothing to do with the character. (in Zadan 1974: 207 *original emphasis*).

The presuppositions of Prince's statement indicate a certain sexageism at play: it would be "disgusting" if the "old lady" performed a few steps on her own (in order to express snippets of joy), as, in his opinion, walking was an unorthodox staging of the physiovocality of the older woman. The immobility of Madame Armfeldt impacted both Gingold's and Stritch's psychology in the same way. Stritch has stated that:

When the lights come up when I'm in the wheelchair, I get up, and I walk around the theater abnormally fast. I'm running around the theater and telling them that I'm still ... (signs with her fist "strong"), you know. I can *still* take walking parts! (Theatre Talk 2011).

Similarly, Gingold wrote in her autobiography:

I loved the idea of all my London chums watching the show and thinking, "Poor old thing can't even walk now". Then I surprised them by rushing forward in full fettle to take the curtain call. (1988: 202).

Although these two statements were made more than two decades apart, and by two different individuals coming from two different continents and two distinct performing cultures, it is worth noting that they both communicate the same need: that of the performers to juxtapose the immobility of their characters with their own body and to redeem their performed-as-defunct physicality.

According to Jonathan Tunick, the orchestrator of *A Little Night Music* (and most of Sondheim's musicals), "a simple choice of an instrument can do plenty to develop subtext [...] [regarding] how the music relates to the plot and the characters" (in Dundas Wood 2002: 109). True to his statement, the song begins with arpeggios allocated equally to the harp and the celesta played in a sequence. Both instruments, with their fey, capricious and idiosyncratic timbre, orchestrate a sonic "time machine" towards the character's past. Madame Armfeldt's singing voice is always doubled by a symphonic instrument (sometimes by an alto flute, some others by a solo violin and a viola, sometimes by a clarinet or a bassoon, and in a few instances, orchestration alternates between two instruments). However, if what Paul Gemignani (8) has said about Tunick's orchestration strategies is true, then this choice of such an instrumental 'support' could be troubling:

[He] has a good ear and he knows not to over-orchestrate. He also knows that when you have an actor who has had little singing experience, you must put more melody in the arrangement, and with a singer with great training, you do not put melody in the arrangement at all. (in Zadan 1974: 109).

Gingold, however, was no stranger to musical theatre performances; her experience would make her voice more than adept at delivering the song with no melodic help. A few more questions arise: Is it possible that the generic physiological symptoms of an aging female voice (for example, a less stable phonation) were viewed by the creative team as a potential hindrance to the delivery of a reliable performance of the melody? Could it be that the acoustic markers of an old female voice were too earth-and-body bound for the ethereal musical tint of the song? It is equally

plausible that the doubled melody could represent a sonic representation of yearning and that the specific choice of orchestration serves as an attempt to smooth out the effects of the female aging voice on the audience's ears.

If it is acceptable for a fictional aging woman to forget but not for the actress who plays her; if words overrule melody; if this aging voice carries within professional experience but is perceived as "not enough" and is aided with stronger orchestration; if overall, the role does not lean into the physiovocal reality of this aging female voice, then both aging female vocalities, true and imaginary, are being invalidated. Madame Armfeldt's signature song is a two-edged musical apparatus, a doubly transparent aesthetic mirror: on the one side, the character reminisces the loss of style, skill, craft, and passion of the art, while, on the other, her aging performer demonstrates all of the above with exemplary virtuosity, adroitness, and finesse.

Madame Armfeldt dies in the "third smile of the night". Her death does not add something to the dramaturgy or the plot, except that she speaks the last spoken line in the musical ("only the last"). The purpose of her death is unclear, especially if we consider that she dies at the end of the musical, while in Bergman's film she does not. Immediately after her death, all other characters gather on stage and dance/waltz in a rather festive mood, signalling the end of Act Two and of the entire musical.

Grandma (Edna) and her Song.

Advancing almost forty years in time and moving from the US to the UK, this article now turns to discuss another supporting role, listed by the *Stage Agent* website as "elderly" and with about the same age requirements as Sondheim and Wheeler's Madame Armfeldt: Grandma (Edna) in Lee Hall and Elton John's musical version of *Billy Elliot* (2005). (9) Set in County Durham during the miners' strike (1984-1985), the musical is about class, dancing, gender, and sexuality. Grandma Edna is bound (together with the rest of the characters) to a life of significant dependency on rules and ideologies deriving from paternal systems. (10) Socially excluded and stripped of the right of choice in her life as a working-class woman (a complete antithesis in narrative with Madame Armfeldt's past), Edna, now an old woman with dementia, finds herself a *shadow* in a turbulent realm of hypermasculine heteronormativity.

Despite this contrast between the two characters, both Madame Armfeldt and Grandma Edna have nonsensical lines that contribute nothing essential to the narrative and are not directed to anyone specific. Their lines are often not responded to, or are construed by the other characters as an old woman's meandering or self-targeted speech. Madame Armfeldt has lines about her game of Solitaire ("Seven of Hearts on the Eight of Spades!"; "The Ten of Hearts! Who needs the Ten of Hearts") often delivered off stage (Sondheim and Wheeler, 1973: 88-89) and Grandma has an irrational attachment to her pasty ("I'm looking for my pasty"; "Have you seen me pasty?"; "They've purloined my bloody pasty") (Hall and John 2005: 8; 9; 11), an obsession that is treated disparagingly by the other characters, except from Billy, whose interactions with her always include giving her a pasty.

With very few lines throughout the musical, Grandma Edna is barely noticeable until the moment where, prompted by her grandson's curiosity if she remembers

her deceased husband, she responds (rather disarmingly): “How could I forget yer granddad, Billy? We were married thirty-three year” (Hall and John 2005: 30). When Billy asks her “how was he like?”, Grandma Edna “pulls out a stool and pats it for Billy” (30) while the first notes of her song (“Grandma’s Song”) start playing. Everything in the scene conveys a stereotypical dramaturgical approach: the older lady will recount a (rather mawkish and cloying) love story to her grandson. Quite surprisingly, she delivers an utterly unexpected and abrupt spoken response which veers off musical theatre’s recurrent clichés and breaches conditioned expectations: “He was a complete bastard” (31). Her song emerges out of indistinct sounds of a male crowd and Edna sings in *colla voce* the first lyric: “I hated the sod”. This strong non-negotiable protest of hers immediately silences the male background noise, making it clear from the very beginning: her husband’s domineering presence in her life will account for her insipid presence and namelessness. Billy’s granddad will not be referred to by his real name as he does not deserve this acknowledgment. For her, he was a “swine”, and a drunken “fool” who lied “like a bairn and snore[d] like a mule” (31).

In an A major scale and a waltz tempo, the first verse of the song starts with the accompaniment of a rehearsal piano, a keyboard, and a monophonic synth, with the aging character’s voice to the forefront. (11) As horns, drums, percussions, and a bass begin to fill the musical sonic background, the melody loops continuously with Grandma Edna, now in perfect lucidity, oscillating between the (mostly) bad and the (sparse) good memories (about ‘those’ cherished dancing nights). Contrary to how instrumentation has treated Madame Armfeldt’s song, in which the vocal melody was duplicated by instruments, here Grandma’s voice leads the way throughout with no instrumental support. Although the slow waltzing melody of the song implies a smooth, romantic, ingenue-like vocal delivery, her voice utilises the harsh glottal attack associated with her Geordie accent: it is powerful and gruff; husky, metallic, with bite and with an edgy timbre. As if to comment on conventionalised approaches (and responses) regarding female voices, she makes a biting vocal juxtaposition between her almost masculine chest voice and her utilising an atypical squeaky (almost mocking) head voice when she refers to “women” in her lyric “women were women and men they were men” (31).

As the song goes on, the looping melody helps Grandma Edna to go deeper and deeper into a dreamworld. The number becomes a trance-like reminiscence of what was real and what would have been ideal. While gradually detaching from the normalised subjugation, oppression, and repression that she had to endure as a woman in a miners’ community, she proclaims a different kind of (aging) wisdom than the conventional forbearance affixed to older grandmas: “But if I went through my time again/oh, I’d do it without the help of men/or at least your granddad/but then again, you know/best not to linger” (31-32). Whereas in “Liaisons” Madame Armfeldt glorifies her past, Grandma (Edna) in her song embraces an alter ego of a treasured “what if”. With a strong political statement against sociocultural stereotypical views of what Featherstone and Hepworth (1991) approach as a sequestration of the aging bodies from public attention, Grandma Edna *surprises*. She frees herself of the sexist stigma and the problematic constructions of the “aged’s attitude to their own bodies” (170) as she removes her robe to reveal her aging body in a stunning armless nightdress (which, in reality, is a ballgown). What

she now wears becomes “an argument”, with “a powerful semantic value”, as Barthes (1979) emphatically highlights, regarding the core purpose of a costume (207). Such a costume communicates distinctively her liberation from the “sanitised, one-dimensional [...] stereotyp[e]” (Featherstone and Hepworth, 1991: 382) of just being a working-class grandma with a “house coat” Grandma is now fully transgressed to Edna with no age-related restraints attached: she is angry, feisty, and opinionated about men, life, and choices; a gracious *noise* as she rises up against receptions of the materiality of her aging female body-voice.

Through her song Edna expresses her vehement disapproval, claiming the entire stage both sonically and visually with her aging vocality: “If I’d only known then what I know now/I’d given them all the finger” (Hall and John 2005: 32). Through a throaty rasp, she produces an utter body-voice mayhem; her strong emotions dictate her physicality, and she provides for herself a cathartic dancing release. The aging character remembers and at the same time *reinvents*, not only her younger, submissive, dancing self but the significant and spectacular self of *the now*. Whereas Madame Armfeldt has a stagnant view of her past and is confined to a wheelchair, Edna, in an almost orgasmic musical crescendo leads herself to a frenetic dancing delirium. (12) Through her song, she becomes an *irregularity* and redefines the aesthetic properties of musical theatre as she swirls and gambols weightless, stage centre: “And gone dancing/and not give a shit/spin around and reel and love every bit/and I’d dance alone and enjoy it/and I’d be me for an entire life/instead of somebody’s wife/and I never would be sober” (32).

Ann Emery (1930-2016) originated the role of Grandma at the age of seventy-five and starred with all thirty-nine of the West End’s Billies, playing the character until she was eighty-four. There are almost no interviews with her focusing on her contribution and, sadly, all critics limited their references of the role in their reviews to a sentence. Perhaps the only exception is Susannah Clap’s review in the *Guardian* (2005), in which she acknowledged the role’s strong “feminist vein”. One of the (rare) insights regarding the role comes from Carole Shelley (1939-2018), who performed Grandma in the original Broadway production and kept playing the role for three years (2008-2011). Shelley has commented on the “craziness” of the role:

I have to go nuts at one point and that was very hard for me because I’m sort of a bit of a control freak. And to really let loose, let rip and be this dotty old grandma... (2009).

The role of Grandma (and especially her song) could be seen as an alternative space that upsets prevailing functionalistic assumptions towards female aging. Unfortunately, what truly happens is the *opposite*: the role itself cancels all its potent(ial) messages. Apart from the fact that the character is given a very short stage time, very few lines, and a song with musical characteristics that allude to songs composed for children (short, simple, and repetitive music phrases), Grandma is allowed to redirect canonical approaches because, dramaturgically, she exists within these essentialist and homogenising definitions of female aging. Her body-voice is framed: appropriated as an *aging vocality in dementia*. This “dotty old grandma” is granted the right to partially undress on stage revealing parts of her aging flesh as the manifestation of a *symptom* of her mental condition (losing

inhibitions); she is licensed to “let rip” *because* restlessness, agitation and shouting are behavioural changes observed in middle-stage dementia. By the end of her song, all that is left is not the uprising of an aging working-class woman but the paroxysm of an old woman with a neurological condition.

“Neither and either”: Female aging as an undecidable condition in musicals

Grandma and Madame Armfeldt may have been created within the dramaturgical framework of two musicals originally conceived almost half a century apart, and which are completely different regarding plot, music, setting, and sociocultural perceptions of female aging, but they are disconcertingly similar. In a sense, both roles might be grand opportunities for actresses in their seventies or eighties to work in the industry (on the condition that these two musicals continue to be revived), but both prove that musical theatre internalises sexageist practices. Both characters have been denied their first name, and are presented only with their familial or social labels (Grandma and Madame); both show on stage symptoms of their aging (forgetfulness, weakness, dementia), both have lines with no particular meaning or purpose other than to further illustrate their oldness, neither is actually taken seriously by the other characters, and both have songs about their lives *through* their relationship with men. These roles, nevertheless, have been played by musical theatre performers who were at the same age as their characters, and constantly demonstrated a *different reality* of aging, by being cognitively alert, singing—and, for the part of Grandma, dancing—on stage, while working long hours, entertaining thousands of audiences night after night and for years.

By interrogating these two musicals’ interlocking system of ideas in relation to female aging, it becomes apparent that such roles in musical theatre oscillate between idiosyncratic contradictions: on one hand they benefit aging female characters and their performers and on the other, they diminish and limit them.

Considering aging *and* voice as a process and in order to understand and highlight the ways that musical theatre functions as an ambivalent medium within which creative visibility/audibility intertwines with marked vocalities, my (PhD) research has turned to the Derridean *différance*: this passive space and active spacing that differs and defers at the same time dislodging security and identities (see Lucy 2004: 25-26), and consists of productive and conflictual qualities (Derrida 1982). Inspired by Derrida’s interpretation of Plato’s pharmakon, and his argument that the pharmakon is an undecidable condition, being “neither remedy nor poison, neither good nor evil, nor the inside nor the outside” while, at the same time, acts as “both remedy and poison (...) [and] can be simultaneously beneficent or maleficent” (1981: 43;70), I have suggested the conceptual framework of *the aging female voice as pharmakon in musicals*. The concept of the pharmakon in relation to the aging female voice in musical theatre understands the female aging as an undecidable condition in musicals that, in many cases, turns the aging female voice against *itself*. (13) It encapsulates the *coexistence* of, and the intricate interplay between, these progressive and regressive elements embodied and envoiced within each role and facilitates an understanding of the multifaceted dramaturgical

approaches that render the aging female voice in musicals “a type of painful pleasure”, simultaneously linked to its (perceived) malady and its (aspirational) treatment (Derrida 1981: 99). The aging female voice as pharmakon in musicals can be applied with an evaluative and revisionist approach to facilitate reassessments and redefinitions of existing roles, such that they make audible the various ways in which this repertoire both spotlights and entraps aging female vocalities. As a concept, the aging female voice as pharmakon can be further utilised within age studies in order to deviate from its hitherto visual-centric focus and in voice studies as a paradigm for further research on voices that appear to be celebrated at first but are at the same time confined and undermined.

(not a) Conclusion

Treating this section not strictly as a conclusion, I wish to refer to a recent observation. The social/physical distancing due to Covid-19, which necessitated self-isolation and entailed theatre-closures through the period 2020-2022, created a fertile and creative ground for aging performers to celebrate their passion, their vocal capacities, and their presence in ways that they have not been able to access before. Such an example is the livestreamed virtual concert for Sondheim’s ninetieth birthday (26 April 2020). Without the acoustics of a theatre, the technical audio assistance and/or the professional manipulation and augmentation of their voices, musical theatre’s ‘warhorses’—American actresses Linda Lavin (b. 1937), Bernadette Peters (b. 1948), Patti LuPone (b. 1949), Christine Baranski (b. 1952) and Donna Murphy (b. 1959), Audra McDonald (b. 1970), English actress Maria Friedman (b. 1960), and Filipina actress Lea Salonga (b. 1971)—sang, belted, and performed from their homes famous Sondheim numbers not necessarily written for aging female voices. With music accompaniment or just a cappella, wearing an earphone (or not), they exposed their aging voices and utilised all flaws to create unique vocal interpretations of the songs. (14) The reception of these performances from the audiences who were watching on the other end of their screens listening on conventional speakers, was outstanding with some of the comments pinpointing the raw experience of these aging female voices:

“My jaw dropped hearing this. Ms Salonga’s voice has done nothing but improve with age”.

“I’m smiling and dancing and laughing as Linda [Lavin] sings. What a talent!”.

“Such a great voice!” (for Maria Friedman).

“The years have added to [Donna Murphy’s] greatness. Breath-taking!”.

“Can we admit how AMAZING of a performance this was for being on Zoom?” (for *Ladies Who Lunch*).

“No special effects, no autotuning. I’ll listen to this all day. Thank you!” (for Bernadette Peter). (Broadwaycom, 2020).

These performances (many of which included inverted deliveries—performances of roles that the actresses played when they were much younger—as well as numbers from roles they were never cast in) showcased in unconventional (and, for many, extraordinary) ways that aging female voices can create a new ‘vocal culture’ in musicals.

Embarking from the observation that youth is the forefront of musical theatre, this article has closely followed two aging female roles in music, text, and performance; it has suggested the conceptual framework of the aging female voice as *pharmakon* in musical theatre and it has opened an important discussion that has long been overdue. To borrow the term from British feminist photographer, writer, and educator, Jo Spence (1934-1992), this article is a “cultural sniping” concerning the relation between female aging and musical theatre. “Research is always a process of filtration and discarding, of dead ends and new destinations” (Gardner 2020: 11): the anticipated vocal emancipation of musical theatre’s aging women has a long road ahead. Such roles need dramaturgies that do not revolve solely around men, death and the interplay of past and present (especially within stereotypical references to how female aging relates to them). Vocal scores and choreographies need to challenge long-established preconceptions and honour the *physiovocality* of their aging female performers as well as their exemplar virtuosity and expertise. New vocal trainings in musical theatre are needed to help the aging performers to maintain their voices. Creative teams, critics, reviewers, and press need to take a step back and re-tell the narratives.

Endnotes

1. This is a direct comment to the song “Liaisons” from the musical *A Little Night Music* (1973).
2. For some of the most recent works on aging see: Morganroth Gullette 2017; Fuchs 2019. For recent works on musical theatre see: Rodosthenous 2017; Dobrick 2018; Macpherson 2018; Hischak 2020; Mordden 2021.
3. Although related, archetypes and stereotypes are different: archetypes can be used as a medium by directors, actors, and scholars “to study characters, meanings, and messages within shows” (Schrader 2016: 78); a stereotype is “a clearly identifiable character type that is played (...) with attention on only the most behavioral traits (...) and as a negative comment on the character” (Deer and Dal Vera, 2008: 149).
4. Some examples of such musical theatre roles: Aunt Eller in *Oklahoma!* (Rodgers and Hammerstein II 1943) or Miss Lynch in *Grease* (Jacobs, Kasey, and Farrar 1971) draw from the type of an Old Maid; the comic but unpleasant character of Miss Hannigan in *Annie* (Strouse, Charnin, and Meehan 1977) has elements of a Shrew; the malicious Mrs Meers in *Thoroughly Modern Millie* (Tesori, Scanlan, and Morris 1967 [film], 2002 [stage musical]) draws characteristics from a Crone; the shady and deceptive villain of Disney’s *The Little Mermaid*, Ursula (Menken, Ashman, Slater, Wright 1989 [animated film], 2008 [stage musical]) has components of the old witch in *Commedia dell’Arte* (*La Ruffiana*) and the Hag; the Witch in Sondheim’s and Lapine’s *Into the Woods* (1987) embodies all elements of the Witch’s stock character, the domineering and sharp-tempered Miss Trunchbull in *Matilda the Musical* (Minchin and Kelly 2010) is a Battle-Axe character; and Norma Desmond in Lloyd Webber, Black and Hampton’s *Sunset Boulevard* (1991) draws from a Grand Dame.

5. Sexageism is a concept introduced by Mary Wilson Carpenter (1996:142) that brings together patriarchy/the male gaze and ageism.
6. The editorial of the Journal of Geriatric Physical Therapy titled 'Use of Term Elderly' (Avers et al., 2011), argues that "[t]he term elderly lacks an equal and opposite term pederly (...) often used to describe frail individuals; without applying the well-known and valid criteria of frailty" (153).
7. According to Gingold, her deep voice was the result of untreated nodules on her vocal folds due to her misusing her voice when she was a teenager and the refusal of her mother to allow an operation to remove them: "It may seem strange but once I was a high coloratura soprano and trained seriously as a singer. Then I got nodules on my vocal chords. One morning it was Mozart and the next, "Old man River" (1989: 150).
8. Paul Gemignani was the musical director of the original production of *Follies*. Jonathan Tunick was the orchestrator of *A Little Night Music* (and most of Sondheim's musicals).
9. Although the character is referred by the playwright as "Grandma" there is one line that mentions her name in the first scene when one of the miners greets her by saying 'Good morning, Edna'. Unfortunately, in the West End version this line does not exist, and the audiences never learn her name. In this article, as a homage to the aging character's identity, I include her name.
10. Having its roots in the late nineteenth century the "Durham System" was "a system of blackmail and threats" (Atkin, 2001: 28) that bred "a culture in which mining was not just a job; it was a way of life" (27). This tyrannical bond which provided between employers and employees "their sense of place", determined the place 'by birth', and anyone who breached it was subjected to "fine or imprisonment" (Beynon & Austrin, 1996: 26;27;30). It was repealed by the founding of the Durham Miners' Association.
11. Exact terms used in the full reference score of a seventeen-piece orchestration by MTI (2015 edition).
12. Grossberg (1984) suggests, indeed, the relation between a musical crescendo and an orgasm (247).
13. In his essay 'Plato's Pharmacy' (1981), Derrida reads Plato's dialogue between Socrates and young Phaedrus and focuses on the myth of Egyptian Theuth, his invention of writing and the dialogue's ambivalent utilisation of the Greek word pharmakon. He argues that Plato's original text is "a battlefield of an impossible process of translation" (Johnson in her 'Translator's Introduction' in Derrida 1981: xxv) and he highlights the polysemy of the word.
14. The songs performed: Linda Lavin, "The Boy From..." from *The Mad Show*; Maria Friedman, "Broadway Baby" from *Follies*; Lea Salonga, "Loving You" from *Passion*; Donna Murphy, "Send in the Clowns" from *A Little Night Music*; Audra McDonald with Meryl Streep and Christine Baranski, "The Ladies Who Lunch" from *Company*; Patti LuPone, "Anyone Can Whistle" from *Anyone Can Whistle*; Bernadette Peters, "No One is Alone" from *Into the Woods*.
15. The idea of the cultural sniper is that a single person cannot change a culture but like a sniper can use their skills to target specific areas. (Spence 1995).

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