01/12/2024; Hollywood’s secret musicals

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

*<CLIP> Suspense Strings Sound Effect | Free Sound Clips | Scary Halloween Sounds*

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): Something strange is happening in Hollywood.

*<CLIP> Mean Girls Trailer #1*

*Principal: Oh hell no!*

SEAN: I’m not talking about that guy they got to host the Golden Globes.

*<CLIP> Page Six, Jo Koy bombs at the Golden Globes:*

*Koy: Yo! I got the gig ten days ago!*

SEAN: I’m talking about the secret musicals.

*<CLIP> Mean Girls Trailer #1*

*[montage of voice blended together]*

*Regina: You could be really hot, if you changed… everything.*

SCORING IN <Olivia Rodrigo - get him back!>

SEAN: A new *Mean Girls* movie comes out today. It promises it is “Not Your Mother’s Mean Girls,” which … rude. But also what does that mean? The trailer never tells you, but check out this footage from a recent screening:

SCORING OUT

*<CLIP> TikTok, user03776127*

*[Cady Heron begins singing Stupid with Love]*

*Crowd: [Groans]*

SCORING IN <Stupid with Love | Mean Girls>

SEAN: That audience groaning when not Lindsay Lohan Cady Heron starts singing? They’re bummed because they didn’t want a musical. They didn’t necessarily know they were getting a musical. But they got a musical. And it’s not just *Mean Girls*. Why Hollywood is hiding its musicals, coming up on *Today, Explained*.  
  
 [THEME]

SEAN: Ben Lindbergh is a senior editor at *The Ringer*, where he recently wrote a piece of investigative journalism about the American film industry.

BEN LINDBERGH (EDITOR, THE RINGER): Yes, there is a cover up occurring.

SCORING IN <KPM\_KPMLPB\_0016\_01301\_Moody\_Minor\_APM>

BEN: Hollywood is hiding its musicals.

NOAM HASSENFELD (host, *Unexplainable)*: (singing) *They’re not telling anyone.*

BEN: The actual music has been absent from trailers for some of the most prominent movie musicals of the past year.

NOAM: *Hollywood is hiding the actors who are singing.*

BEN: I think the main ones that people have taken note of was *Wonka*.

NOAM: *Willy*.

BEN: *Mean Girls*.

NOAM: *Regina*.   
  
BEN: Also to some extent *The Color Purple*.

NOAM: *Celie.*   
  
BEN: At least in its initial trailer. These are all very much movie musicals. They do not hide the music once you are in the theater.

NOAM: *I’ll be singing*.   
  
BEN: But the trailers for these films really obscured the fact that there was music in the movies themselves. Which started some conversation among some people who were in the know. As word of mouth went around, hey, you know, this is a musical, right?  
  
 NOAM: *Whoever is producing, why you hiding my singing?*

BEN: I think people kind of did a double take. I did not know that I saw the trailer. Nothing in the trailer told me that these are musicals.

NOAM: *I wanna sing! I wanna sing! Yeah!*  
  
BEN: So there's been multiple rounds, I think, of people coming across this secret, hidden knowledge that these are actually movie musicals.

NOAM: *Let me sing it ‘cuz I am a star. Yeah!*

SCORING OUT

SEAN: And I too saw all the initial trailers for those three offending movies you mentioned. So let's just go through them one by one and tell people, if you watched these trailers, what you would see or what you would think, starting with *Wonka*.

BEN: Just about no music, as I recall. There were multiple trailers, but really no sign whatsoever other than Hugh Grant's Oompa Loompa maybe singing in the second one.

*<CLIP> WONKA | Official Trailer*

*Wonka: An Oompa what now?*

*Oompa Loompa: Allow me to refresh your memory. [flute plays]*

*Wonka: Oh, I don’t think I wanna hear that.*

BEN: And you know, you would think that if you've seen the original *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* or even the remake, you know that There's some music in a Willy Wonka movie …

*<CLIP> Pure Imagination | Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*

BEN: But they are doing their best to hide that here. And the movie doesn't hide it, you know. You know, basically, as soon as the movie starts, okay, there's going to be singing in this thing:

*<CLIP> Pure Imagination | WONKA!*

BEN: But from the trailer, you really would not be able to guess that whatsoever. The baseball writer Craig Calcaterra, in his newsletter, wrote about my piece because he went to see *Wonka*, and in his theater there was a man who, as soon as Chalamet opened his mouth to sing the first song, just let out an audible “Oh no!”

*<CLIP> WONKA | Official Trailer*

*Wonka: Oh. I don’t think I wanna hear that.*

SEAN: [laughs]

BEN: Which just goes to show that there really are people out there in the wild who do not know that these are movie musicals and in some cases may be disappointed. So I suppose that backs up the strategy.

SEAN: Okay, next up, let's talk about *The Color Purple*, which I believe was based not only on the original source material, but also on the Broadway musical of *The Color Purple*, right?

BEN: That's right. Very successful Broadway musical with multiple runs. And the first trailer for *The Color Purple*. Promised that it would be a bold new take on the beloved classic, but did not specify what made it bold or what made it new …  
  
SEAN: [laughs]

BEN: … which is the fact that it's a musical, a successful musical. You'd think that they'd want to play that up!

SEAN: So they're basically telling you, ‘We're doing the musical!’ without saying, ‘We're doing the musical.’

BEN: Right! In fact, the trailer mentions that it's based on the 1982 novel, but it does not mention that it's adapted from a Tony-winning Broadway play, which seems like something you would want to brag about.

*<CLIP> The Color Purple | Official Trailer*

*Taraji P. Henson: Oooh! Sweet loving god!*

*Fantasia Barrino: And I’m here! Yea! [sing]*

SEAN: And lastly, because it comes out today, let's close out this trend with the new *Mean Girls* movie, which I'm sure a lot of people are wondering why there is a new *Mean Girls* movie?

BEN: Yes.

*<CLIP> Mean Girl Scenes/Quotes:*

*Gretchen: That is so fetch!*

*Regina: Gretchen, stop trying to make ‘fetch’ happen. It’s not going to happen.*

BEN: One reason why there's a new *Mean Girls* movie is it's a musical, which again, you would not know and probably would not even suspect from the trailer.

*<CLIP> Mean Girls Trailer #1*

*<crowd screams>*

*Gretchen Wieners: Why are you dressed so scary?*

*Cady Heron: It's Halloween!*

*Gretchen: Cady, if you don’t dress slutty that is slut shaming us!*

*Other Character: That’s just unprofessional*

BEN: Now, I think there's sort of a tell, which is that if you went to the theater to see Taylor Swift's Eras Tour movie, there is a special theatrical trailer for *Mean Girls*, which did highlight the fact that it's a musical:

*<CLIP> Mean Girls (2024) Teaser Trailer (Taylor Swift- The Eras Tour Version)*

BEN: So if you're in the theater to see something with music, then they will disclose that there's music in this movie. But if not, if you're not already in that audience, then they're just not going to tell you. And you will just wonder, why are they remaking this thing? It's not even that old. And you will just be in the dark until someone lets you know or you go see it.

*<CLIP> 30 Rock*

*Jenna: Well, the NY City Critics association just sent me this: Best Actress in a Movie Based on a Musical Based on a Movie*

*Liz: Hey! That’s great!*

SEAN: And why, Ben? Why are they doing this?

BEN: Musicals have not done well lately.

SCORING IN< KPM\_KPM\_0380\_00301\_Eastside\_Story\_\_B\_\_APM>

BEN: They have not made much money in theaters. And they have not garnered great audiences on streaming. Now, you don't have to go into the distant past to find very successful movie musicals, whether it's *La La Land* or *The Greatest Showman*.

NOAM: (singing) *They didn’t try to hide me.*

BEN: These are award winning and nominated movies. And movies that made a lot of money, ultimately. Or *Hamilton*, of course, which was an enormous streaming sensation when it came out on Disney+.

NOAM: *Disney, won’t you love me again?*

BEN: But since then, things have changed. And in fact, the industry really invested in movie musicals post-*Hamilton*. There was sort of a production boom inspired perhaps by Hamilton.  
  
 NOAM: *This is when I get sad.*   
  
BEN: But almost everything that has surfaced since has flopped to some extent. And so there's been a quick correction here as Hollywood has pivoted to, ‘Wait! Maybe people don't want to see movie musicals, or at least they don't want to be told that they're about to see a movie musical.’ And so I think that's what's driving this trend.

NOAM: *I know when I’m not wanted.*

SCORING OUT

SEAN: Who are the floppers? Who are the main offenders here?

BEN: So some of the more prominent ones would be *West Side Story* by Steven Spielberg.

*<CLIP> West Side Story | America*

BEN: …Or Lin-Manuel Miranda's *In the Heights*.

*<CLIP> In The Heights | In the Heights*

BEN: There are others that are a little less prominent. *Dear Evan Hansen*:

*<CLIP> You Will Be Found | Dear Evan Hansen*

BEN: *Everybody's Talking about Jamie*:

*<CLIP> Prime Video, And You Don't Even Know It | Everybody's Talking About Jamie*

BEN: Not enough people were talking about Jamie, as it turned out.   
  
SEAN: <laughs>   
  
BEN: Of course there was *Cats*, the pre-pandemic notable movie musical bomb.

*<CLIP> Jennifer Hudson - Memory (Cats)*

BEN: And then there were a bunch of movies that came out maybe on streaming and just didn't do well based on what we can tell from streaming charts.

*<CLIP> Tick, Tick… BOOM! | “Louder Than Words”*

BEN: *Tick, Tick… Boom!* and *A Week Away* and *Diana: The Musical* all on Netflix, or *Annette* on Prime Video:

*<CLIP> Annette | We Love Each Other So Much*

BEN: Or *Come from Away* and *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series* - another mouthful - with are on Apple TV Plus and Disney Plus, respectively.

ANNETTE OUT

BEN: So a lot of these just seem to be misses. Again, maybe the market was oversaturated. Maybe they overinvested in the wake of Hamilton. It's kind of a copycat industry. But most of these movies just failed to break through. Granted, of course, there was the pandemic, which certainly hurt the movies that were released in theaters, but even the ones that have come out since or that came out on streaming only just haven't done well lately.

SEAN: Do we think *Wonka* and *Mean Girls* and *The Color Purple*, which were both based on the Broadway musicals of those stories, were greenlit in this era, this post-*Hamilton* era where everyone was drunk on musicals.

BEN: It could be partly that I think in some of these cases, though these are based on established IP, right? So you might wonder, well, if they're going out of their way to hide the fact that these are musicals, why are they even making musicals right?

SEAN: Exactly. It feels like a paradox.   
  
BEN: Yes

SEAN: Like, you could, like, nip this in the bud by just not greenlighting musicals.

BEN: Exactly. And we might not see as many movie musicals made in the near future, but these are based on established properties, right? People know *Wonka*. They know *Mean Girls*. They know *The Color Purple* in one incarnation or another. And just as in any genre, it's easier to get things greenlit these days when you can point to …. this is a recognizable brand, or this previous version of this thing made X amount of money, right? So I think these are sort of exceptions in a sense. And maybe what is going away or what will go away is the less recognizable movie musical…   
  
SEAN: Mmm.

BEN: … the one that doesn't have some established source material.

SCORING IN <SCOR\_SCORE\_0139\_02201\_Broadway\_Legacy\_APM-03>

BEN: I talked to a lot of movie marketing people and trailer production people. And they said that the goal of the trailer is just to get people in the seats. There are some people who would be attracted by a trailer that makes it explicit this is a movie musical, but there are maybe more people who would be repelled by that, or at least would not think that they want to see a movie musical. And so the best thing to do, the studios have concluded, for now, is just to omit that fact, right? So as not to turn anyone off. And so they hope that if you are a movie musical fan, you'll find out some other way that it's a movie musical and you'll show up. And if you're not, then, yeah, you know, they're trying to trick you in hopefully not the most nefarious way. But they're trying to get you to go see the movie by any means necessary.

SCORING BUMP

NOAM: (singing) *But why do they hate me?! Stay tuned, you’ll see!*

[BREAK]

*<CLIP> good morning baltimore | hairspray*

*TRACY: Oh, oh, oh, woke up today –*

*<CLIP> Hady Mawajdeh (producer): Explained.*

SEAN: Let's talk about people who hate musicals. Why do people hate musicals?

STEVEN COHAN (AUTHOR & PROFESSOR EMERITUS, SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY): I don't know if hate is the right word.

SEAN: Ohhhhhhh. Professor, hate is the right word! <laughs>

SCORING IN <The Trolley Song - Meet Me In St. Louis>

STEVEN: I just think they are not drawn to musicals. And I think that musicals have lost their connection to popular culture, particularly popular music, in the 30s and 40s, during the Depression and World War II, Musicals were extremely popular, and studios made many of them, and they were one of the main ways, along with radio, that popular music was disseminated, so lots of hit songs came from musicals, big bands were featured in musicals, popular dances were featured in musicals. And with the 50s and the advent of rock and roll, that began to shift.

SCORING OUT

<CLIP> Chubby Checker - The Twist

SEAN: Steven Cohan is a professor emeritus at Syracuse University. He’s written multiple books about movies, musicals, and movie musicals. He’s the kind guy, when you’re like: what’s up with this new trend, Hollywood’s hiding its musicals, he’ll be all:

STEVEN: It’s not new. It's been going on since 2007, I think.

SEAN: Huh!

STEVEN: I know *Sweeney Todd* disguised the fact that it was musicals, but if you. I don't think *The Greatest Showman* advertised that it was a musical. If you look at trailers for, um, musicals, I don't think many of them, if at any, uh, advertise that they're musicals. Studios advertise to their desired demographic. And just because the studios think people don't like musicals, don't mean that people don't like musicals. I do think that there are certain gender divisions. Now, I'm going to make a simplification. When I would teach the musical the majority of students in my class tended to be women, and then there'd be a handful of guys. And they all love musicals. Some of it was because of Broadway. And some of it had to do with familial associations because of watching musicals with a grandparent, or events, like watching *The Sound of Music* for a slightly older generation, when it would air on TV with a, as a family event. And I think associations from childhood can be very powerful in terms of people's tastes. So I think it's fair to say that the studios think that people don't like musicals. The other thing is that a convention of trailers these days. Is to give as much of the plot as they can.

SEAN: Yep.

STEVEN: Songs are harder to excerpt in a way that indicates a plot. When musicals were a mainstay of studio production, and so a studio like MGM or Fox, were, were churning out eight or nine musicals a year in the 40s, they would advertise the number of new songs, the various performers, and they would have little clips of performances. They were not interested or focused on advertising a narrative. But these days, the trailers advertise the narrative. And so I think there's that industrial reason, just the convention of a trailer. But I agree. I think that the studios think that audiences will not rush to see a musical.

SEAN: And, and why do you think that is?

STEVEN: I think there's probably many reasons people aren't used to watching musicals. They are not accustomed to the break in the illusionism of a musical …  
  
SEAN: Mmm.

STEVEN: … when someone will burst into song and you hear an orchestra. Whereas when musicals were produced in large numbers, audiences were used to and accepted a break from the illusionism of the narrative and the heightened sensibility, the heightened utopian experience of watching someone dance in the streets or sing their heart out. I also think there is a lingering association of musicals with a queer following …

*<CLIP> Keep it Gay | The Producers*

STEVEN: … so that it makes some people uncomfortable. But I think the main reason has to do with just not knowing how to watch a musical.

SEAN: Does it break your heart a little bit that audiences have fallen out of practice with musicals?

STEVEN: Uh. I think it used to, but not anymore.

SEAN: Hm.

STEVEN: [laughs] I mean, for one reason. I have a lot of musicals on Blu-ray.   
  
SEAN: [laughs]  
  
STEVEN: So I can still watch them.

SEAN: You know, I think you and I may not see eye to eye on the haters out there, but I do feel like in my personal experience, I have heard many a friend and acquaintance say, ‘Oh, I don't want to go see that. I hate musicals.’ But! But I will agree with you that I don't think that person necessarily hates musicals. I think that person has maybe seen a character jump into song and roll their eyes and said:

*<CLIP> Wonka Trailer*

*Wonka: Oh, I don’t think I wanna hear that.*

SEAN: What would you say to them to maybe help change their mind?

STEVEN: I'd say go see Aquaman.

SEAN: Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!  
  
STEVEN: [also laughs]

*<CLIP> LHUGUENY, AQUAMAN THE MUSICAL*

*My dad’s from the land, my mom’s from the sea. I am Atlantis’ true king.*

STEVEN: Okay? [laughs] Um, I know, I I know that I, I know the kind of a viewer you're talking about. And if you're going to talk about people hating musicals, then there's something really profoundly disturbing about the musical. As a I think that's much, much more deep seated and psychological than simply, um, than than simply not accepting someone bursting into song. I mean, I, I've taught musicals to, uh, in, in general and in introduction courses and also in courses on the musical. And I've seen students laugh uncomfortably when someone bursts into song because they're not used to it. And it's unexpected. But I think that when someone says I hate musicals, it's because of what a musical represents to them that is so disturbing. That's why I think that, that there's still a lingering association of otherness with musicals.

SEAN: So this is interesting. It sounds like you're saying at the heart of this matter is people might think, oh, musicals are kind of queer. That's not me. Musicals are about white people. That's not me. Is there a musical out there that sort of transcends those stigmas maybe, uh, and can be sort of enjoyed by one and all?

STEVEN: I think if anything, it would be the musical, the film version of *Hairspray*.

SCORING IN <You Can't Stop the Beat | hairspray>

STEVEN: It had a multiracial cast. It was about popular music. It had drag. It's well done. It had people of size. It defied authority. It was anti-authority.

SEAN: The film version of *Hairspray*. That's the one where, like John, John Travolta and Christopher Walken, they, like, slow dance on the rooftop, and it's movie magic.

STEVEN: Yeah! And Michelle Pfeiffer.

SEAN: Queen Latifah.

STEVEN: That’s right. It's derived from John Waters’ *Hairspray*, which is a really good film. That's a musical. and both of them are about the advent of rock and roll as youth music in the 50s and the integration of what was, uh, sort of pseudo version of American Bandstand.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Professor Steven Cohan. You might remember him from *Masculinity and the Movies in the Fifties*; *Hollywood Musicals, The Film Reader*; *Incongruous Entertainment: Camp, Cultural Value, and the MGM Musical*; or *The Sound of Musicals*. Hady Mawajdeh was the star of this production. The supporting cast includes Matthew Collette, Laura Bullard, and Rob Byers. Noam Hassenfeld played “The Musical.” The rest of the ensemble includes Noel King, Amina Al-Sadi, Avishay Artsy, Victoria Chamberlin, Amanda Lewellyn, Miles Bryan, Haleema Shah, and Patrick Boyd. Miranda Kennedy’s our executive producer. We did not use any music by Breakmaster Cylinder, but sometimes we do. *Today, Explained* is distributed by WNYC. This show is a part of Vox, which is totally free thanks in part to contributions from our listeners. Join us at vox.com/give. We are off Monday for Martin Luther King Jr. Day. It’s a day of service. Do something nice for somebody! More *Today, Explained* on Tuesday.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]