
“What makes [a contemporary production of Funny Girl] all the more impressive is that few actors, or theater companies outside of summer stock, dare to attempt Jule Styne's and Bob Merrill's grand spectacle that propelled Barbra Streisand's career nearly 40 years ago.”


“Our renewed fondness, even adoration, of Streisand is evidence of a nostalgia for a time when striving for excellence was at least as important as making a buck, and when originality was prized over focus-grouped packaging. In the early 1960s, Streisand reset the cultural parameters when she walked onstage in Funny Girl and said ‘Hello, Gorgeous’ to herself in the mirror – a slender, unusual girl who wouldn’t compromise on appearance, performance, or integrity. Fifty years later, she still matters, and for all the same reasons.”

William Mann, *Hello, Gorgeous* (2012)
Abstract

Rarely has there been a marriage of actress-and-role as lasting and profound as that of Barbra Streisand and her career-defining performance as Fanny Brice in the stage and film versions of Jule Styne and Bob Merrill’s *Funny Girl*. How and why, though, did Streisand’s associations with both the role and real life persona of Fanny Brice come to be so strong?

The enduring “phenomenon” surrounding Streisand’s original performance in *Funny Girl* has cultivated a stigmatic “shadow” that has followed all subsequent presentations of the show since its debut on Broadway in 1964 and its 1968 film adaptation, augmented by Streisand’s novel presentation of a distinctly kooky, ethnic rebellion against the fear-induced conformity of early 1960s America – one that ultimately became a symbol of ethnic pride for an entire generation of Jewish Americans and beyond. Streisand’s performance came to be conflated with an urban, working-class sect of Brooklynnites and promoted fantasies of class mobility and ethnic inclusiveness for an American-born generation of immigrants’ children during a time of deep identity contemplation in the United States. This trend also coupled with the star-making nature of the show’s leading role to allow Streisand to claim Brice’s journey to fame as her very own.

By analyzing reviews, highlighting case studies of several contemporary productions of *Funny Girl* from the past 20 years, and interpolating secondary source material from scholars of musical theatre as well as Jewish identity, this piece explores the far-reaching cultural and ethnic associations between Fanny Brice and Barbra Streisand within the context of how notions of “being American” have evolved from Fanny Brice's era until the present day, as well as in relation to the constraints that have surrounded Jewish female celebrity in mainstream American culture since the early twentieth century. It also discusses the challenges that such associations have posed to casting directors and producers of topical incarnations such as the recently scrapped 2012 Broadway revival helmed by producer Bob Boyett.

Streisand’s lasting legacy as a symbol of ethnic and cultural pride ultimately implies that theatre-makers may simply have to wait until the infiltration of an entirely new generation of ticket-buyers for which Streisand’s alliance with Fanny Brice means little to nothing. Although such a generation is beginning to shape, especially with Ryan Murphy’s recent acquisition of *Funny Girl*’s rights and an extended storyline about a fictionalized revival of the show on FOX’s *Glee*, I ultimately argue that the pervasive ethnic and cultural associations of Streisand’s initial performance – now deeply embedded with the show itself – will likely endure for years to come.
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I. Introduction: “Hello, Gorgeous”

Arguably one of the most accomplished musical artists in contemporary performance history, Barbra Streisand catapulted to the seat of mega-stardom that she occupies to this day with her luminary turn as Fanny Brice in the original 1964 Broadway production of *Funny Girl*. Written during the tail end of Broadway’s Golden Age of musicals, *Funny Girl* tells the story of real-life *Ziegfeld Follies* star Fanny Brice and her toilsome romance with infamous con artist Nicky Arnstein. Through the years, Streisand came to be profoundly associated with both the role and the real-life persona of Fanny Brice, and this deep-rooted association between the two performers has undoubtedly affected all subsequent productions of the *Funny Girl*: nearly any woman who has been granted the opportunity to play the role of Fanny Brice since the original 1964 incarnation, as well as the successive 1968 film version and its 1975 sequel, *Funny Lady*, has been compared to, or against, Ms. Streisand. Streisand thus serves as a model and also an obstacle for any woman who steps into the lead role of *Funny Girl*, and anyone who now auditions for the part is simultaneously auditioning to play Brice and Streisand.

For numerous reasons, a little-known Barbra Streisand came to be famously associated with the role of Fanny Brice when she stepped into the spotlight at the Winter Garden Theatre more than fifty years ago. Most notably, Brice and Streisand possessed numerous physical and personal similarities on which the show’s producing team heavily capitalized when marketing the show and promoting Streisand’s performance. In addition, Streisand’s voice progressively came to be conflated with an urban, working-class set of Brooklynilites and promoted fantasies of class mobility and ethnic inclusiveness, a trend that complemented the show’s “rags to riches” theme and ultimately allowed Streisand to channel and claim Fanny Brice’s journey to fame as
her very own through the Broadway production, the successive 1968 film franchise, and beyond as she ultimately became a “Brooklyn-girl-turned-entertainment-phenomenon.”

This enduring “phenomenon” surrounding Streisand’s performance in *Funny Girl* has in turn cast a “shadow” that has followed all subsequent presentations of the show since its theatrical debut and successive film adaptation. This shadow is further augmented by the fact that Streisand’s novel presentation of an “emerging identity”² through a distinctly kooky, ethnic rebellion against the fear-induced conformity of McCarthy-era America ultimately “became a symbol of Jewish ethnic pride for an entire generation.”³ Fanny Brice never had this opportunity, as an “aggressively” Jewish female performer was quite simply unfeasible during the early twentieth century as she rose to prominence in an America preoccupied with conventionality and dominated by an influx of immigrants. As the immigrants’ American-born children matured, however, such reluctance to accept a defiantly ethnic female celebrity dissipated. A young, uncompromising Barbra Streisand was thus met with popular embrace when she burst upon the Broadway scene and took the local – and ultimately, the national and global – stage by storm moving into the early 1960s.

From a contemporary standpoint, *Funny Girl*’s legacy is now a multi-pronged one: in addition to its initially-staged New York and London productions of the 1960s and all subsequent touring, regional, and community productions, the show became a globally released film in 1968 and has also been recently invoked in FOX’s television program *Glee*. With each additional prong has come a bigger and more varied influx of viewership as *Funny Girl* has

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shifted from the New York stage to the mass-broadcasting medium of television, each subsequent level of exposure made possible by the pioneering one that preceded it. Through all these incarnations, however, Streisand’s “shadow” has remained compelling within the collective theatre-going consciousness, affecting both the casting processes and reception of numerous, if not all, manifestations of the original piece.

While several contemporary performances of *Funny Girl* have been met with critical or popular success, there has never before been a large-scale revival of Styne and Merrill’s 1964 triumph on a Broadway stage. Young musical theatre maven Lea Michele has recently been aligned with both Brice and Streisand via her role as Rachel Berry – an ambitious performer cast as the lead in a fictional revival of *Funny Girl* – on *Glee*. As an entirely new generation of theatre consumers unfamiliar with Streisand’s portrayal of Brice emerge into adolescence and adulthood, Michele’s multi-layered portrayal of Berry-as-Streisand-as-Brice within the mass television medium suggests that she may be an ideal choice should a grandiose stage production ever become a reality, although the far-reaching ethnic and cultural associations of Streisand’s long-standing alliance with Brice’s persona will likely endure indefinitely.
II. Becoming Brice: The Creation of a Character and the Ethnic Inclusion of Working-Class Brooklyn

Fanny Brice, born Fannie Borach to Jewish immigrant parents Rose Stern Borach and Charles Borach in 1891, grew up in Brooklyn, New York as the second first-generation American of her family; her mother had emigrated from Budapest, Hungary more than a decade prior and her father from Strasbourg, France. A natural comedienne from a young age, Fannie — who later changed her name to the less ethnic “Fanny Brice” as her career in the entertainment industry began to flourish — started performing in burlesque shows at age 18, brought a wide range of decidedly Jewish characters to the stage, and ultimately went on to become Broadway’s premier-earning star with her appearances in Florenz Ziegfeld’s Ziegfeld Follies throughout several years from 1910 to the 1930s. During this time, she also married a con artist named Julius W. “Nicky” Arnstein, about whom she sang the now classic torch song “My Man” in the 1921 Follies. In the years following her performances on Broadway, Brice continued her work as a comedienne until her death in 1951 with the creation of her weekly radio persona, a bratty toddler affectionately named “Baby Snooks.”

At the time during which Brice was beginning her rise to prominence on the vaudeville circuit and endeavored to move into the more mainstream medium of radio performance, immigration had begun to be heavily regulated by the United States government, beginning with Congress’ Quota Act of 1921. When the even more restrictive Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924 was passed, immigration rates were strictly limited to 165,000 individuals per year, a figure

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5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
less than twenty percent of the pre-World War I average.\textsuperscript{7} Such restriction of the United States borders to foreigners corresponds to a phase in which Brice was beginning her ascent to widespread fame in radio performance, a far more national venue than New York’s \textit{Ziegfeld Follies} could ever have afforded her. As her career blossomed, she accordingly and unsurprisingly made greater attempts to assimilate a highly Jewish persona and a career in which she “sang primarily to Jewish audiences” into something more palatable for broader American spectators less accustomed to the aggressive ethnicity she portrayed on New York stages.

In August 1923, alongside headlines about the death of President William Harding, \textit{The New York Times} and numerous other prominent newspapers printed stories announcing Fanny Brice’s elective plastic surgery to reduce the size of her nose, a facet of her appearance that prominently communicated her ethnic European-Jewish roots for all to see. Of the voluntary surgery, Brice proclaimed, “No woman on the stage today can afford to have a nose that is likely to keep on growing until she can swallow it,” indicating early twentieth-century America’s collective reluctance to accept a celebrity so distinctly ethnic in appearance.\textsuperscript{8} Brice felt that “being identified as ‘too New York’ and ‘too Jewish’ was limiting her career,” and in order to become the national radio personality into which she ultimately developed throughout the 1930s and 1940s, she literally had to downscale – and almost virtually erase – the aspect of her body that perhaps most prominently asserted her Jewishness.\textsuperscript{9} Brice’s surgery was not just a subtle

\textsuperscript{7} The 1924 immigration quotas for Hungary and France, the countries from which Brice’s parents hailed, were 3,954 and 473 – a shockingly low percentage of the 165,000-immigrant total. This signals a near-erasure of new individuals from the United States who hailed from Brice’s national background(s). For more information on quota totals, see “Who Was Shut Out?: Immigration Quotas, 1925-1927.”

\textsuperscript{8} Grossman, \textit{Funny Woman}, 146-8.

washing away of her ethnicity but also a definitive public performance of such erasure, for in 1920s America, an overtly Jewish female celebrity was, quite simply, impossible.

In addition to the reformatory nose surgery Brice underwent in 1923, she, along with Yiddish theatre and film star Molly Picon (b. Malka Opiekun), rose to greatest prominence in the national arena by playing childlike characters both onstage and on radio. It first and foremost seems noteworthy that Brice garnered greatest national attention on radio, a medium in which her vocal talent was mostly prized over her appearance, despite the fact that the latter was altered via surgery. Furthermore, her most successful radio endeavor was that of “The Baby Snooks Show,” a weekly program of the 1940s in which she played her most recognizable radio persona: a bratty but charming toddler by the name of “Baby Snooks.” By adopting the somewhat ethnically neutralizing persona of a child 40 years younger than her, Brice was in a way able to disconnect and stand outside her typically assertive Jewish ethnicity in order to make her performance more acceptable for broader, national-scale audiences. Indeed, as Joyce Antler notes in her 1997 book The Journey Home: Jewish Women and the American Century, “Brice’s mimicking of childish speech and her roguish escapades charmed audiences. In the guise of a little girl – without the gestures, mannerisms, and Yiddish accent of her stage burlesques – Brice found on radio the nationwide following she coveted.”

Like Brice’s elective nose surgery, her great national acclaim as Baby Snooks further suggests that a Jewish female celebrity was a notion that broader American audiences, undoubtedly influenced by the stringent immigrant laws that went into effect in the early twentieth century, were simply unprepared and reluctant to fully embrace. This notion is further confirmed through Jewish female performers such as Sophie Tucker, who performed in

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10 Antler, The Journey Home, 149.
blackface early on in her career, an action that “denied her femaleness, [as well as] her ethnicity.” Tucker was also quite often mindful of the makeup of any given audience: for example, while her signature song in the United States was the ethnically neutral “Some of These Days,” her more notably “Jewish” song, “My Yiddish Mama,” was a much greater success in Europe. Of the latter song, she notes, “even though I loved the song and it was a sensational hit every time I sang it, I was always careful to use it only when I knew the majority of the house would understand Yiddish.” Such active reluctance to bring ethnicity into mainstream American culture on Tucker’s part is further proof of America’s disinclination to effusively embrace ethnicity in popular performance during the era in which Fanny Brice began her rise to fame. All this would soon change, however, as an entirely American-born generation developed and a defiantly unabashed young Barbra Streisand burst upon the Broadway scene during a moment of intense contemplation of American identity at the dawn of the 1960s.

Barbra Streisand’s life followed a trajectory similar to Brice’s: like Brice, Streisand was born in 1942 to working-class Jewish parents in Brooklyn, New York. Although her early life was tumultuous, with her father dying before her first birthday, she also began performing at a young age: she appeared in summer stock and small, off-Broadway shows during her teenage years, eventually going on to sing in nightclubs and perform the minor part of Miss Marmelstein on Broadway in the 1963 mounting of I Can Get It For You Wholesale, a venture met with critical praise despite the ensemble nature of the show. In 1963 she recorded her first studio album, The Barbra Streisand Album, which won two Grammy Awards. She also appeared on television several times, performing on programs including Jack Paar’s Tonight Show (1961),

11 Antler, The Journey Home, 139.
12 Ibid, 142-3.
Author's Name


Accounts of the Funny Girl rehearsal process state that “[Streisand] was a gifted singer who reacted strongly, quickly, and emotionally to any directorial suggestion and who found it difficult at first to play a character other than herself.” There were, however, many inherent physical similarities between the two women: they were both Jewish, a facet of their appearance and speech patterns emphasized in Funny Girl when the character of Fanny exclaims that she’s “a bagel on a plate full of onion rolls.” Both women also possessed unconventional, quirky physical looks, as evidenced particularly in Brice’s gangly limbs and Streisand’s highly accentuated nose. As Streisand herself stated upon learning she was granted the role, “[Fanny and I are] very much alike…[when Fanny talks], it’s like me talking,” and later, in a press release for Funny Lady, “both [my and Fanny’s] careers started on a kind of funny-looking-girl-getting-famous business.” Of the culturally similar pair, Boston theatrical journalist Kevin Kelly notes that “in a standard reference they’re even described in much the same words: Fanny

16 Jule Styne and Bob Merrill, Funny Girl (1964; New York: Capital Records, 1992), CD.
Brice ‘an American Jewish entertainer who made a virtue of her plainness’ and…Streisand ‘an American singer and entertainer who made a virtue of her odd looks.’”

Deliberate conflation of ethnicity and looks aside, however, the profound association between Brice and Streisand further blossomed during the rehearsal process as composer Jule Styne became more familiar with Barbra’s talent. For example, Styne shaped “Don’t Rain on my Parade,” perhaps the most famous number in the show to this day, to highlight Streisand’s voice, “likely influenced by his first impression of Streisand as Miss Marmelstein.” Moreover, Bob Fosse, the show’s original director – later replaced by Garson Kanin – wrote, “‘Make it like B[arbra].’ next to [a scene depicting] Fanny’s confrontation with a theater owner” in his initial production notes. Therefore, as Streisand was beginning her transformation into Brice, she was also simultaneously infusing the show’s depiction of the Follies star with aspects of her own personality. As the rehearsal period progressed, the stories and personnas of the two women would come to be deeply interwoven with one another to a point of nearly complete fusion.

Much of Streisand’s now deep-rooted public association with the role of Fanny Brice therefore stems from the fact that she had already started to become inextricably intertwined with her character counterpart early on in the casting and rehearsal process, a precept perpetuated through the show’s early marketing materials. Carol Burnett, who also auditioned for the role of Fanny, told producers that they’d “need a nice Jewish girl to play a part like that,” and producers found exactly that in Streisand, ultimately using it to their benefit when promoting the

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As Arthur Laurents understood the relationship between the two women, “they needed to become the same thing, at least for promotional purposes,” and the uncanny likeness between Brice and Streisand was thus packaged and used to market *Funny Girl*, both on the part of producer Ray Stark and Streisand’s then-publicist Lee Solters. Acknowledging this deliberate attempt at synthesis of the two women’s personas, biographer William Mann writes:

> The ‘angular young girl with the nose of an eagle, slightly out-of-focus eyes and a mouth engaged in a battle with a wad of gum’ could just as easily have been Fanny Brice as Barbra Streisand. Producer Stark…[conflated] the two…using Barbra’s established persona [cultivated during prior Broadway and television stints as well as her] biographical narrative to create and sell *Funny Girl*.

Both Brice and Streisand’s backgrounds epitomize the “rags-to-riches” Cinderella trope of a poor underdog hurled to stardom on the stage, and the ethnic likeness of the duo only served to make the similarity of these circumstances all the more apparent.

In one particular promotional instance, on April 24th, 1962, two years before *Funny Girl* was slated to open on Broadway, Streisand made one of more than a dozen appearances on Mike Wallace and Joyce Davidson’s television talk show *P.M. East*. Don Softness, Streisand’s publicist at the time, arranged to have her presented with a fake “Fanny Brice Award for Comedienne of the Year” on the air as a preemptive and “not-so-subtle bid for the role of Brice.” Bestowed upon Streisand under the guise of a bogus organization called “The National Association of Gag Writers,” the award was nothing more than publicity stunt created by Streisand’s management to generate an initial link between Streisand and Brice within the public, television-viewing consciousness. This public attempt to associate Streisand with Brice from the

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22 Ibid, 354.  
23 Ibid.  
24 Ibid, 353.  
start – in this instance, before she was even officially cast in *Funny Girl* – foreshadows the way in which that connection was further emphasized by *Funny Girl*’s producers. As Chaney notes, “Streisand and her cadre of publicists…had to work the [public relations] machine hard” in order to ensure an indissoluble association between the two women that would endure for years to come.²⁶

Once cast, Streisand was also heavily equated with Brice in promotional materials for the original Broadway production. An illustration by famed entertainment industry artist Al Hirschfeld was published in *The New York Times* on March 22, 1964 to coincide with the show’s Broadway opening on March 26:

The piece depicts Streisand, clad in her costume from *Funny Girl*’s “I’m the Greatest Star” scene, looking in a mirror with the reflection of Fanny Brice – a real-life photograph superimposed upon Hirschfeld’s drawing – looking back at her.\(^\text{27}\) A succinct description of the illustration on the Al Hirschfeld Foundation’s website explains: “Barbra Streisand in *Funny Girl* looking in mirror and sees herself as Fanny Brice.”\(^\text{28}\) The image – which would have been seen primarily by native New Yorkers reading *The New York Times*, in other words, the bulk of the theatre-going audiences who would be purchasing tickets to the initial Broadway engagement of *Funny Girl* – was thus another calculated attempt to fuse Streisand’s persona with Brice’s both on and off the Broadway stage for promotional purposes, in this case by overtly representing the two women as literal mirror reflections of one another.

Hirschfeld’s deliberate accentuation of the physical similarities between the two women for *Funny Girl*’s advertising becomes all the more evident when considering another Hirschfeld-penned drawing of Streisand published as a *New York Times* commemoration of the opening of *I Can Get It for You Wholesale* in 1962, depicting Streisand’s character as a sleekly-dressed young secretary quite dissimilar from the ragtag, homely Brice.\(^\text{29}\) In this particular drawing, the more obviously ethnic elements of Streisand’s character that aligned her with Brice so strongly from the start are much less accentuated than in the *Funny Girl* drawing: Streisand’s signature “ethnic” nose, for example, while elongated, is nowhere near as pronounced in the *Wholesale* drawing as it is in the *Funny Girl* piece.


\(^{28}\) Ibid.

In addition to her physical attributes, Streisand’s singing voice also came to be heavily associated with the working-class Brooklyn roots to which both she and Brice laid claim. Feld et al. claim that the voice has social meanings embedded within it: a singer’s voice, in this sense, may serve as a “material embodiment of social ideology and experience” and reveal a great deal about the particular, localized communities of which he or she is a part.\(^{30}\) As a Jewish actress playing a Jewish character who initially came from modest means – in a show being performed in New York City, no less – Streisand’s voice thus quickly came to be “conflated with New York, Brooklyn, the working class, and the urban,” at points seemingly natural and untrained.\(^{31}\) Such artlessness is particularly evident in a number that occurs early on in the first act of the


show, titled “I’m the Greatest Star,” in which Streisand varies her voice between exaggerated, mock-operatic pitches and a heavy New York accent with Yiddish intonation. As she sings, “I’m a natural Camille / As Camille I just feel / I’ve so much to of-fer,” she inflects upwards on the word “Camille” with a derisive air of operatic refinement, but then reverts back to her New York accent as she places a more coarse, Yiddish intonation on the final word “offer.” In this song, as well as throughout her overarching characterization of Fanny Brice, Streisand’s voice thus serves as a material embodiment of the working-class realm from which both she and Brice hailed. In addition, Streisand, a Brooklynite herself, was bringing a decidedly relatable figure to the stage for an audience composed primarily of New York residents, which was likely another contributing factor to her remarkable success in the role as she began to foster a hometown fan base that would follow her throughout the rest of her career.

Indeed, in addition to the extensive critical praise for her performance as Fanny Brice, Streisand garnered an intense, young fan base who felt connected to the star’s Brooklyn roots. Following the publication of the initial glowing reviews, legions of fans calling themselves the “Winter Garden Kids” began to congregate outside the Winter Garden Theatre on West 50th Street after each and every performance.33 Many of these devotees were school dropouts and oddballs who identified with the kooky qualities of both Fanny Brice and Streisand herself; they dressed like Streisand in thrift shop clothes, and many even imitated the Brooklyn accent to which she laid claim both in performance and in real life. Super-fan Stuart Lippner, who also hailed from Brooklyn, expressed gratitude to Barbra for “doing a lot” for the accent, once telling a reporter that after Streisand burst upon the scene, “a lot of kids [weren’t] ashamed of it

32 Styne and Merrill, *Funny Girl*.
33 Mann, *Hello, Gorgeous*, 477.
anymore.”  

With her intimate, relatable vocal intonation, Streisand allowed fans to confront their most deep-rooted, affecting issues by “guiding [them] in a familiar, friendly way” to accept aspects of themselves of which they were ashamed, such as their accents.  

At the time *Funny Girl* was first introduced to Broadway audiences in spring 1964, representations of Jewish ethnicity were just beginning to visibly make their way into mainstream culture with pieces like Jerry Bock, Sheldon Harnick, and Joseph Stein’s *Fiddler on the Roof*, which debuted on Broadway the very same year: although *Fiddler on the Roof* arguably dealt more with overtly religious aspects of Judaism than *Funny Girl*, both shows provided representations of unambiguously Jewish characters from an earlier historical era and directly tackled issues of identity, assimilation, and ethnic pride.  

As Henry Bial writes in his 2005 book *Acting Jewish*, unlike the time period in which its subject rose to prominence, “*Funny Girl* demonstrates that the woman who looks Jewish can gain acceptance not by erasing, hiding, or avoiding her Jewish looks.”  

In an era following the previous decade’s conformity-based ideals of McCarthyism, Streisand brought an uncompromisingly ethnic character to the forefront of American culture, breaking the mold of what American audiences were previously used to seeing both onstage through her performance as Brice and offstage through her equally uncompromising, yet relatable, quirky persona and homely *mieskeit*-from-Brooklyn-turned-star brand of celebrity.

34 Ibid.  
36 In her 2013 book *Theatrical Liberalism: Jews and Popular Entertainment in America*, Andrea Most posits the ways in which Zero Mostel’s Tevye in *Fiddler*... and Barbra Streisand’s Fanny Brice in *Funny Girl* – performers who were both “proud Jews of the 1960s” – were superimposed upon stories about “charismatic” Jews from earlier eras, thus turning the pieces themselves into vehicles of ethnic pride rather than mere accounts of history.  
Therefore, while Streisand’s rise to prominence did coincide with an explosive moment of American identity exploration within popular culture at large, she also helped to kick-start said moment through her refusal to conciliate the masses via corporeal modification. Unlike the time period in which Brice rose to prominence, a Jewish female celebrity was thus now becoming possible because Streisand was boldly making it possible by refusing to compromise her ethnicity through plastic surgery or intentional vocal modification, onstage or off. In essence, Streisand’s fictional and real-life presentations served as daring “distillations” of Brooklyn Jewish society in the mainstream, announcing and claiming a distinctly new kind of superstar as a Kennedy-helmed American society simultaneously began to move away from the fear-induced conventionality of the era directly preceding. 38 No longer did ethnic performers have to hide behind childlike facades, radio microphones, or elective surgery, as they did in Brice’s day: for instance, Streisand’s face was not only left unaltered, but gallantly featured on the cover of Time magazine with an accompanying article that went so far as to cite her nose as “a shrine” and likened her profile to that of the all-regal Nefertiti. She was therefore simultaneously introducing ethnicity into the mainstream and rewriting standards of beauty for generations to come. 39

Furthermore, the 1960s were a time of copious exploration of the then shifting, expanding notions of American identity on the New York stage, indicating not only that an assertively Jewish celebrity was finally becoming practicable, but that so too were vehicles in which ethnicity was a principal focus. For example, Rodgers and Hammerstein’s Flower Drum Song, about Chinese-American immigrants, opened on Broadway in 1958; Lorraine Hansberry’s A Raisin in the Sun, exploring the black experience in Chicago’s south side, debuted in 1959; and

38 Ibid, 225.  
*Fiddler on the Roof* premiered alongside *Funny Girl* in 1964. These explosions of identity on the mainstream Broadway stages suggest that the period during which Streisand began her rise to fame in the early 1960s was a moment at which American identity was changing – and more importantly, expanding in scope – in terms of not only ethnicity, but also race, religion, and class. Streisand’s newfound success as an award-winning recording artist and critically lauded Broadway star accordingly promoted fantasies of ethnic inclusiveness and class mobility for exacting sets of individuals within this expanded range, such as Jewish Americans, many of whom had by that time “achieved middle-class status and were better educated than most Americans.” Together with her contemporaries from shows like *Flower Drum Song, A Raisin in the Sun* and *Fiddler on the Roof*, though, Streisand also helped usher a particular mode of “aggressive ethnicity” into mainstream culture with her “defiantly” Jewish appearance (e.g., her adamantly untouched nose, which she uncompromisingly chose not to alter as Brice did) and Brooklyn accent, simultaneously promoting a positive representation of Jewish ethnicity and imparting hope upon a younger generation who now saw fame and success as within their reach.

However, though Streisand refused to compromise on physical facets of her being such as her nose, she did make concessions to her persona as she rose to prominence on the Broadway stage. As she prepared to debut on Broadway in *I Can Get It For You Wholesale*, she removed an ‘a’ from her first name, telling the show’s writer Jerome Weidman:

> I hapna love Brooklyn, but it’s like the name Barbara. Every day with the third ‘a’ in the middle, you could go out of your mind. I mean, what are we here for? Every day the same thing? No change? No variety? Why get born? Every day the same thing, you might

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40 Antler, *The Journey Home*, 76.
as well be dead. I’ve had 19 years of ‘Barbara’ with three a’s, and all my life born in Brooklyn. Enough is enough.\textsuperscript{42}

While Streisand-as-Brice undoubtedly served as a source of inspiration for working-class Brooklynites, here she acknowledges a desire to somewhat extricate herself from those Brooklyn roots, aiming for a greater sense of sophistication and worldliness through the deletion of the middle ‘a’ from her first name.

Streisand did not, of course, undergo a procedure as drastic as Brice’s nose alteration, defiantly claiming the physicality of her ethnicity and shepherding it in the mainstream through her performance as Fanny Brice and beyond; she was able to avoid this grandiose alternation partly because she was intrepidly paving the way for blatant physical expressions of ethnicity in broader American culture through her refusal to concede, but also partly because of the expansive moment of identity exploration in which her star had begun to rise. Yet Streisand’s admission to Weidman illustrates the way in which she seemingly still felt pressure to advance from the “homely” roots that shaped her childhood and adolescence. As her career moved from tiny venues like the Village Vanguard to the sprawling Broadway stage, and eventually to the silver screen in her 1968 film debut in \textit{Funny Girl}, Streisand did refine select facets of her persona, such as her name, with an eye towards more widespread renown. Streisand was effectively a Brooklynite Jew with a sophisticated edge, and such concession towards erudition, though slight, remains a voluntary concession all the same – and one that becomes significant when considering how said impulse to compromise has only further tapered moving into the millennial era.

III. A Star is Born on Broadway and Beyond

In addition to the pride she brought to a new generation of Jewish Americans, another component of what undoubtedly made Streisand so irresistible to audiences was her indubitable “it” factor. In his 2007 book It, Joseph Roach claims that the “it” factor is embodied through two simultaneous and incongruous states of being: “‘it’ is the power of apparently effortless embodiment of contradictory qualities simultaneously: strength and vulnerability, innocence and experience, and singularity and typicality among them.”

This contradictory nature is apparent in Streisand’s voice: while her New York accent and Yiddish intonation provide a vulnerable, “down to earth” quality to the character of Fanny Brice, Streisand was still critically praised for her astonishing vocal finesse, which was evident in the glowing reviews her performance received from critics and contemporaries alike. Reviewer Norman Nadel of The Spokesman-Review called her a “big-voiced, belting singer and brass gong of a personality,” while Sam Lesner of the Chicago Daily News noted that she seemed like “a cross between a sweet-voiced canary and a whooping crane,” again emphasizing the simultaneous rawness and refinement contained within her voice.

In his all-important New York Times review of the show, critic Howard Taubman raved that “since Fanny herself could not be brought back, [Streisand was] the next best thing” and that the budding starlet “[could] make a virtue out of suffering, if she [was] allowed to sing about it.” In addition, after the show’s opening night performance, fellow actress Lauren Bacall stated, “I saw the best thing I ever saw in my life in that girl. She can act,

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44 Mann, Hello, Gorgeous, 473.
she can sing, she has an electric personality, which is what makes a star.”\textsuperscript{47} Streisand therefore embodied the contradictions inherent to Roach’s “it” factor with her simultaneous, “big-voiced” command of the stage and the “passionate expressiveness and intimacy…”[that at the same time made her voice] seem natural and untrained.\textsuperscript{48} She was at once an eminent, untouchable talent and a relatable, self-proclaimed “homely kid from Brooklyn” – a \textit{mieskeit} (“ugly person,” in Yiddish) from humble Brooklyn roots.\textsuperscript{49} Her dualism of aesthetic was discernible both on stage and offstage, as she was concurrently “shlemiel and diva, self-consciously unattractive and glamorously chic, Brooklyn-Jewish whiny and the most beautiful voice in the world…moving from one extreme to the other at will.”\textsuperscript{50}

Streisand was surely further propelled to stardom by the nature of the role itself. Playing Fanny Brice eight times per week on the Broadway – and eventually, in 1966, the West End – circuit required immense physical and vocal stamina, as Streisand single-handedly carried the entire last half hour of the show with three solo numbers in a row that closed out the piece: “Who Are You Now?,” “The Music that Makes Me Dance,” and the reprise of the star-making hit “Don’t Rain on My Parade.” The all-encompassing, dynamic nature of the role meant that \textit{Funny Girl} itself “would hit or miss because of Barbra and Barbra alone.”\textsuperscript{51} At its core, \textit{Funny Girl} is intrinsically a piece about Brice’s attempt to rise to popularity and stardom from her working-class Brooklyn roots, an endeavor that, through her lauded performance in the show, Barbra was likewise mirroring in her own career. The aforementioned song “I’m the Greatest Star” – a simultaneous assertion and performance of Fanny Brice becoming “the greatest star” of the

\textsuperscript{47} Mann, \textit{Hello, Gorgeous}, 468.
\textsuperscript{48} Wolf, \textit{A Problem Like Maria}, 187.
\textsuperscript{50} Kaufman, \textit{Jewhooing the Sixties}, 214.
\textsuperscript{51} Mann, \textit{Hello, Gorgeous}, 468.
Ziegfeld *Follies* revue – was therefore a performative utterance on Streisand’s part, and as Fanny was claiming her stardom within the context of the piece, so, then, was Streisand within her own life.

In her 2002 book *A Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical*, Stacy Wolf alludes to this innately star-making nature of the role of Fanny Brice, claiming that Streisand’s performance simultaneously contained and exceeded the character of Fanny Brice as her adept rise to stardom was vigilantly and deliberately claimed both on stage and off. A notoriously domineering, ambitious woman, Streisand “extended her range of power, soon moving into production as well as performance” as she vociferously advocated for the particularities of everything from her Playbill biography – one line of which states that she “is a follower of Eastern philosophy and cooking but also favors TV dinners on occasion,” again fostering a tension between riches and rags – to the daily toils of *Funny Girl*’s props master. Streisand was consciously obsessed with maintaining the quality of the production and the sanctity of her own public image: “if the music was sloppy, if a prop was dirty,” she wrote years later, in 1991, “I’d make a note of it.” In the same way that “the show would hit or miss because of Barbra alone,” the unique connection between Brice and Streisand meant that the show as a whole was inflexibly a reflection upon Streisand herself.

The sustained association that Streisand shares with the role of Brice seemingly did not, however, come to fruition overnight. After nearly two years playing the part she originated on Broadway, Streisand completed her final New York performance as Fanny Brice on December

53 Ibid, 201.
55 Ibid.
56 Mann, *Hello, Gorgeous*, 468.
26th, 1965. Mimi Hines immediately assumed the role of Fanny Brice on December 27th. Hines garnered enough success in the role to keep the show running on Broadway for an additional year and a half in Streisand’s wake, indicating that the role had not yet become so intimately associated with Streisand’s portrayal in the period immediately following her departure that no other female could viably step into the role. However, it was Streisand’s initial success as Brice that made Funny Girl so unable-to-be-missed that Broadway ticket-buyers still attended the show even in her absence. Moreover, Streisand would also go on to star in the show on London’s West End beginning in April 1966, keeping her paramount portrayal of Brice fresh in the minds of the global theatre-going public while continuing to generate buzz for the show on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. She garnered critical as well as financial success while reviving the role on British soil, one West End reviewer going so far as to tout, “Barbra Streisand performed the daunting feat of living up to her legend. The girl and the myth are indivisible.”

The 1968 film version of Funny Girl ultimately sealed Streisand’s everlasting association with Fanny Brice on a national, and thus, more widely visible scale. Upon Funny Girl’s film release in 1968, “Barbra Streisand” truly became a household name across the entirety of America as well as abroad thanks to her laudable film performance and subsequent Academy Award for Best Actress. Streisand’s deep-rooted association with the role of Brice once again emerged as principal to the film’s success, with director William Wyler affirming, “She had a lot to do with my decision [to make the film]. I wouldn’t have made the picture without her.” Such

60 Ibid.
a bold statement demonstrates the way in which Streisand was still so deeply intertwined with the role of Brice, nearly five years after the Broadway opening. Furthermore, she was one of the only females in history to perform the same role on film that she had originated on Broadway. For example, South Pacific’s Nellie Forbush, My Fair Lady’s Eliza Doolittle, The Sound of Music’s Maria Rainer, and Gypsy’s Mama Rose were all portrayed by two different actresses during their transition from stage to screen. Streisand, however, garnered recognition in both arenas, and “the nationwide release of the film guaranteed not only that Streisand was Fanny Brice but that Fanny Brice instantly became Streisand.”

Streisand’s unique association with the role of Fanny Brice seems unparalleled for the decade in which she began her rise to stardom, not to mention the period spanning from the early 1960s to the present day. For example, fellow Jewish “diva” Bette Midler did not experience the same unbridled success playing a chorus member – and following a promotion, sister Tzeitel – in Fiddler on the Roof that Streisand did in the role of Fanny Brice. Unlike Streisand, who had appeared on numerous radio and television programs, Midler was relatively unknown at the time of her 1966 Broadway debut in Fiddler on the Roof, having only appeared in a few paltry off-Broadway gigs after moving to New York during the summer of 1965. She also hails from Hawaii, thus fundamentally lacking the urban connection that Streisand shared with her hometown. In addition, coming into the show more than two years following its initial opening as a replacement performer, Midler did not have the unprecedented opportunity to originate the part as Streisand did with Fanny Brice. Consequently, Midler was not featured in Fiddler on the Roof’s publicity materials to the extent that Streisand was with Funny Girl. Most importantly, the relatively trifling role of Tzeitel does not possess a performatively “star-making” trajectory, nor

61 Wolf, A Problem Like Maria, 185.
does *Fiddler on the Roof* depict the story of a real-life luminary on the rise as *Funny Girl* does. Based on the differences between Midler and Streisand’s mid-1960s Broadway appearances in *Fiddler on the Roof* and *Funny Girl* respectively, the overwhelming triumph of Streisand’s turn in the latter seems rooted both in her native urbanity and the unmatched caliber and potential intrinsic to the role of Fanny Brice itself.

Nevertheless, the shadow surrounding Streisand’s performance is not entirely unique and is thus potentially indicative of a larger issue related to the association of performers with iconic roles, particularly when their performances are preserved on film. For example, Audrey Hepburn’s portrayal of Holly Golightly in the 1961 film version of *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* has iconically loomed over every artistic incarnation of Truman Capote’s novella since, and the role that Audrey Hepburn so vividly brought to life just prior to Streisand’s star turn in *Funny Girl* has therefore never been successfully occupied by another female performer. The novella-turned-film has endured several different genres of adaptation since the 1960s, including an unsold 1969 television series starring Stefanie Powers and an infamously unsuccessful musical adaptation starring Mary Tyler Moore that closed after four performances because producer David Merrick did not wish to “subject the drama critics and the public to an excruciatingly boring evening.”

There was also a flopped 2009 London stage production with Anna Friel, as well as a 2013 Broadway play adaptation featuring Emilia Clarke that closed after a paltry 55 performances and regularly took in less than half of its potential gross each week. All of this suggests that Hepburn’s looming association with the role of Holly Golightly has managed to remain ever-present even into the twenty-first century.

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Though both Barbra Streisand and the late Audrey Hepburn enjoyed – and in Streisand’s case, continue to enjoy – varied, fruitful careers since the initial conception of their respective roles, their film performances are what ultimately managed to seal the lasting image of woman-and-role. Throughout the years, both Streisand and Hepburn’s performances came to serve as broader cultural signifiers: Streisand as a decidedly ethnic entertainer and signifier of the twentieth-century Jewish-American experience and Hepburn as an alluringly sophisticated fashion idol. As William Mann states, “Streisand reset the cultural parameters for both ethnicity and beauty when she walked onstage in *Funny Girl* and said ‘Hello, Gorgeous’ to herself in the mirror,” and particularly so at a time in America’s history “when originality was [beginning to be] prized over focus-grouped packaging.” As a result, Streisand more specifically represented a unique “emerging identity” of kookiness, ethnicity, and rebellion against the rampant fear-induced conformity of the 1950s, and she was thus “granted a prominent place in the collective memory” of the United States – in turn making any succeeding performer’s interpretation of Fanny Brice far more difficult, if not entirely unviable in a critical and financial sense.

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64 Mann, *Hello, Gorgeous*, 6-7.
65 Lang and Lang, “Recognition and Renown.”
IV. The Post-Streisand Years: Attempting Fanny Brice in Contemporary Performance

Several contemporary productions of *Funny Girl* in the “post-Streisand” Fanny Brice years have undoubtedly – but not unsurprisingly – been adversely affected by the association with Streisand’s initial performance. Most prominent of the modern-day *Funny Girl* blunders was the 1996 national touring company production headed by then 26-year-old American pop singer-songwriter Deborah Gibson and directed by Sammy Dallas Bayes. The tour was the first major mounting of the show since its debut on Broadway in 1964 and was planned as a set of more than two-dozen weeklong engagements in various venues across the country that would potentially culminate in the show’s first-ever Broadway revival. However, after opening in Pittsburgh on October 1, 1996, and playing at four additional venues in the northeast and Midwest to largely abysmal reviews – of Gibson’s apparently dreadful performance in the production, one Philadelphia theater agent harshly suggested, “They should just call [the show] *Girl*” – both the Denver Center for the Performing Arts and San Francisco’s Golden Gate Theatre the dropped the show’s November and December bookings and forced the tour to a temporary halt from which it ultimately never resumed performances.66 The then-associate media director of the Denver Center for the Performing Arts, Jeff Horovka, cited that the venue made the decision to cancel *Funny Girl*’s booking because the production did not “meet their standards,”67 and while Denver Center for the Arts’ executive producer, Randy Weeks “could offer no actual review, the fact they were cancelling it should speak for itself.”68

68 Steven Winn, “‘Funny Girl’ Won’t Play Here After All,” *SFGate*, November 15, 1996.
While she was relatively well known for her pop music and self-written songs that topped the Billboard charts, Deborah Gibson’s performance in *Funny Girl* likely faltered for numerous reasons, the foremost being that Gibson seemingly did not possess the paramount acting and singing chops required of any actress playing Fanny Brice. Playbill.com, for example, reported that “it was difficult to understand [Gibson’s] words” at an October 1996 press-only preview of the show in New York City.\(^6^9\) Furthermore, Gibson did not possess the physical and ethnic similarities to Brice that were so integral to Streisand’s original performance in the show.\(^7^0\) In a 1996 interview, Gibson even dismissively brushed off the importance of Fanny’s ethnicity, flippantly stating, “I grew up on Long Island and have a lot of Jewish friends. Anyway, I'm Italian and that's very similar to being Jewish.”\(^7^1\) Gibson’s subpar performance as Fanny Brice, coupled with the fact that she was not Jewish – yet perhaps more significantly, unable to authentically channel and convey the Jewish ethnicity so central to Fanny Brice’s rise to stardom in her performance – was therefore nowhere near luminary enough to carry a show that already possessed such a uniquely ingrained association with its original star.

Conversely, a 2001 regional production of *Funny Girl* at New Jersey’s Paper Mill Playhouse starring fresh-faced newcomer Leslie Kritzer and Robert Cuccioli seemed to surmount the Streisand “shadow” well enough to garner both financial and critical acclaim. Kritzer’s performance is undoubtedly the most triumphant take on Fanny Brice in the contemporary era, and perhaps even the most successful “post-Streisand” performance of the role to date. While Paper Mill’s then-executive producer Angelo del Rossi had insisted for years that a *Funny Girl* revival would not be possible without a star in the role of Fanny Brice, Patrick Parker – the

\(^{6^9}\) “Gibson’s *Funny* Fanny Rehearses for National Tour,” *Playbill*, October 1, 1996.

\(^{7^0}\) See Appendix for Gibson’s 2010 headshot, depicting a face with porcelain skin, heavy makeup, and features far less “aggressively ethnic” than those of a young Barbra Streisand.

Assistant Director of the 2001 production of *Funny Girl* and the current Associate Artistic Director of Paper Mill – “became very vocal with [del Rossi] and [Paper Mill’s] Artistic Director [and the director of *Funny Girl*], Robert Johanson…that casting any ‘name’ in the role would automatically invite comparisons to Ms. Streisand.”

It was while attending the University of Cincinnati College Conservatory of Music’s annual showcase in 1999 that Parker encountered an unknown Leslie Kritzer and encouraged her to call him should she ever hear that Paper Mill was casting a production of *Funny Girl*. Two years later, at a moment when Paper Mill was auditioning primarily established Broadway actresses and B-level celebrities for the role of Fanny in their 2001 production, Kritzer contacted Parker and was granted the opportunity to audition. After extensive deliberation, Parker ultimately convinced the rest of the show’s creative team that their best bet for success was contained within Kritzer’s “unknown factor,” as she had previously only acquired a few trifling off-Broadway and regional credits since her graduation from CCM in 1999.

Indeed, with a fresh and inventive chutzpah, Leslie Kritzer captivated New Jersey audiences in a way that Deborah Gibson was inherently unable during the show’s 1996 national tour, and Kritzer’s performance as Fanny Brice was widely touted as a critical success: she was praised as everything from “a musical comedy tornado” to “a star with generosity of spirit, paying as much mind to ensemble and to characterization as to vocal finesse...[who] sings a ballad meltingly, hits every high note, accurately, and holds it until you drop.”

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72 Patrick Parker (Associate Artistic Director, Paper Mill Playhouse), email interview with Alexandra Strycula, October 31, 2013.
73 Ibid.
inevitable comparisons [between Kritzer and Streisand],” Parker noted in an October 2013 interview, “but the majority praised [Kritzer’s] performance for being brave, gutsy, amazingly sung and her own.” Though Ms. Kritzer lacks a complete ethnic alliance with both Brice and Streisand, having been raised in the Catholic faith, her father was Jewish and she therefore retained an ethnic connection to the role through one side of her parental lineage; in addition, Kritzer’s face, with a large mouth and plentiful freckles, arguably aligns more with the “quirkiness” Streisand popularized in the 1960s. Moreover, seemingly unlike Gibson, Kritzer laid claim to a well-acclaimed powerhouse voice and acting chops that sustained her performance through both acts of the show. Kritzer was also an unknown performer who harvested her first bouts of widespread critical praise through her performance as Brice, aligning with Streisand’s initial rise to stardom in the role in the early 1960s. The ultimate success that Kritzer brought to Paper Mill’s production was so great that Paper Mill had entered negotiations for a Broadway transfer at the tail end of the 2001 season with producer Bob Boyett, who retained the rights to the show until they were eventually transferred to television producer Ryan Murphy in early 2014, although Boyett abruptly halted plans at the last minute with little explanation to Paper Mill’s artistic staff.

Another production of Funny Girl was staged as a part of Pittsburgh Civic Light Opera’s 2003 summer season starring comedy maven Ana Gasteyer and Robert Cuccioli, who also played Nicky Arnstein in the 2001 Paper Mill Playhouse production. Pittsburgh CLO’s search for the perfect Fanny Brice did not start out intending to cast a star, as they initially explored the “unknown” route and saw numerous auditions from nameless actresses working both regionally

76 Patrick Parker, email interview with Alexandra Strycula.
77 See Appendix for Kritzer’s 2007 headshot. Out of the four “post-Streisand” Fanny Brice actresses discussed in this piece, Kritzer most closely resembles a young Streisand, which perhaps accounts for her great success in the role.
and on Broadway, including a then unknown Stephanie J. Block. Lori Berger, the company’s Associate Producing Director, recalls, “some had it, some didn’t…. it’s very hard to live up to Streisand [because if someone does their own interpretation of Fanny Brice], does it disappoint the audience?” It was eventually suggested that Berger and the casting team see Ana Gasteyer for the role of Fanny Brice, though Berger did not instantly recognize how the Saturday Night Live alumna “would be any better than any of the other people they’d seen” until that point, regardless of Gasteyer’s comedic training.

Like Kritzer, Gasteyer also earned largely positive reviews for her performance, brightly touted as “[pulling] together all of her talents to bring a funny, cheeky, forthright, and charming character to the stage.” Though not entirely known for her musical talents at that point in her career – although she did go on to star as Elphaba in Wicked on Broadway a few years later – Gasteyer’s true success in the role manifested itself most distinctly through her generous comedic chops and her “rubber face [that went] with the quick witted delivery” so inherent to Brice’s extensive career as a comedienne. Indeed, Berger recalls that “there was a similarity [between Brice and Gasteyer in this way] that was natural” from the moment Gasteyer walked into the audition room. However, Berger notes that Gasteyer was largely unfamiliar with Streisand’s performance of Brice, and she instead approached the task of crafting her interpretation of the role through parallels to Brice rather than to Streisand. Gasteyer told TheaterMania’s Brian Scott Lipton the following in a summer 2003 interview, emphasizing an

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78 Lori Berger (Associate Producing Director, Pittsburgh Civic Light Opera), phone interview with Alexandra Strycula, November 8, 2013.
79 Ibid.
81 Ibid.
82 Lori Berger, phone interview with Alexandra Strycula.
alliance with Brice not primarily based in her ethnicity,\textsuperscript{83} like Streisand, but instead in her plenteous years of work as a pioneering female comedian:

\begin{quote}
The first time I sang “People” I thought it was a piece of cake. But then I started thinking about that frame of reference. All of sudden, the vise began to tighten and I saw 3,000 Barbra fans looking at me. But the show is not about Barbra, it’s about Fanny Brice. She is a cornerstone of American female comedy, and I am an American female comic. We’ve even been mentioned in the same documentaries. I think Fanny is a good fit for me; I understand the trials and tribulations of being a funny girl and I’ve been faced with a lot of the conundrums she faced.\textsuperscript{84}
\end{quote}

Though Gasteyer’s portrayal of Brice focused heavily on the comedic elements so inherently critical to the role, she also performed the many solo songs of \textit{Funny Girl} with matching musical talent and a strong, commendable voice, thus possessing two theatrical gifts that combined to culminate in a wholly well-received performance.

\textit{Funny Girl} is performed relatively frequently in community and regional theatrical settings, but given Streisand’s immense association with the role of Fanny Brice, the show has – perhaps unsurprisingly – never been revived on a Broadway stage, save for a one night benefit performance produced by The Actors’ Fund of America. That performance featured sixteen different Broadway actresses as Fanny Brice, an endeavor that all but solidified Streisand as the one true, definitive performance of the Ziegfeld star.\textsuperscript{85} There was also a similar one-night concert event at New York’s 54 Below on March 26, 2014 to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of \textit{Funny Girl}’s Broadway opening, with more than a dozen female and male performers – including Streisand’s Fanny Brice replacement, Mimi Hines – singing through the show’s score against a framework of anecdotes and historical context. The first-ever Broadway revival of \textit{Funny Girl} was slated to open in spring 2012 following an out-of-town engagement at Center Theatre

\textsuperscript{83} See Appendix: though knowledge of Gasteyer’s ethnic background is less readily known, she does have large features similar to Streisand’s (i.e. her nose and forehead) that may perhaps have contributed – even in a small way – to audiences’ warm reception of her performance.

\textsuperscript{84} Brian Scott Lipton, “Who is the Pip with Pizzazz?,” \textit{TheaterMania}, July 22, 2013.

\textsuperscript{85} The Broadway League, “Funny Girl.”
Group’s Ahmanson Theatre, with Lauren Ambrose as Fanny Brice and Bobby Cannavale as Nicky Arnstein, again with Bob Boyett as the show’s lead producer. In the end, the production was ultimately “postponed indefinitely” before it began, with Boyett and his team citing that “the economic landscape [of 2012] wasn’t right to try to do a top-level revival of Funny Girl.”

Despite the scrapping of both Boyett-helmed endeavors, however, the attached Streisand connotations prompted Center Theatre Group to seek non-normative methods of casting for the Broadway-bound 2009 production: an online platform called “Let It Cast.” Established in 2009, this ground-breaking casting method allowed unknown, non-Equity hopefuls from across the nation to audition for the role of Fanny Brice in addition to the more traditional in-person audition channels that ultimately resulted in Ambrose’s casting. Center Theatre Group’s press release for their pioneering use of technology in the casting process boasted, “No Equity card? No agent? No problem!” and stated that the creative team of the show sought a female aged 21 to 35 with “an unforgettably thrilling voice…and great comic skill…. She is a once-in-a-generation talent, and must have excellent comedic timing.” This innovative system suggests that any subsequent production of Funny Girl, particularly any large-scale one with intentions of opening on Broadway, may need to look to casting methods as ground-breaking as the lead actress it ultimately hopes to secure, particularly when considering the unbridled success of a then-unknown Leslie Kritzer in the 2001 Paper Mill Playhouse production.

A November 2013 production of Funny Girl performed by Cambridge University Musical Theatre Society at ADC Theatre under the direction of Emily Burns, for example, quite

interestingly and imaginatively made the decision to cast four different women of varying appearances and ethnicities as Fanny Brice. In a unique re-appropriation of *Funny Girl* that placed Styne and Merrill’s work within the context of a television reality competition à la *American Idol* or *The X-Factor*, the distinctive conception on Burns’ part left the audience “ambiguous as to whether [or not the four actresses represented] four of the same person.” Its four Fannys – Cambridge university students Justina Kehinde Ogunseitan, Paige Thomas, Lily Parham, and Lily Grieve – took individual turns in the spotlight throughout the course of the evening and performed selected numbers together. This particular production can admittedly be considered an anomaly in and of itself, as it quite literally re-imagined the story of *Funny Girl* in a contemporary sense through its presentation of Fanny Brice as a reality talent competition hopeful in the year 2013. Such a transformative decision, however, somewhat served to disassociate the piece from any prior audience expectations connected to Streisand’s performance of Brice and now wide-reaching celebrity personality. Through this overt modernization of a piece originally presented to audiences in the 1960s – and, indeed, perhaps because of it – the Cambridge University showings of *Funny Girl* at ADC Theatre also serve as an example of a case in which Streisand’s “shadow” seems to loom less fiercely over the show as a cooperative whole.

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89 At the time of the production, Emily Burns was a third-year English student at Corpus Christi College. More information about Burns’ background and casting decisions can be found in a pre-show interview published on ADC Theatre’s website in November 2013 (see “Meet the Director: *Funny Girl*”).

The Cambridge University Musical Theatre Society production is also an example of a more amateur incarnation of the show as compared to regional theatre productions or the United States national tour, and reviews of the show by professional theatrical critics are accordingly sparse.92 Interestingly, though, in the few reviews that were published in the days following the show’s opening, there exists a marked absence of comparisons of the production’s four Fanny Brice actresses to Streisand. A review of the production published by Leanne Walstow in The Cambridge Student, for example, cavalierly mentions that the show served as the initial vehicle that earned Streisand an Academy Award in 1968, yet does not note her involvement in the original Broadway production. The review proceeds to focus on the show’s overarching themes of celebrity and fame more broadly. In fact, the piece opens with an emphasis on Funny Girl’s inherent overall success as distinct from Streisand’s particular triumph in the role, citing the

92 Aside from the informational preview piece published on Varsity, the only critical reviews of the show that exist were circulated online via local, low profile publications The Cambridge Student (November 12, 2013) and The Tab (November 13, 2013).
piece as an eight-time Tony-nominated “tested classic” difficult to tackle not because of the inseparable association with its original star but instead because of its numerous accolades. Walstow also notes that Burns’ decision to present the show with four main actresses in one role provided the piece with “a refreshing sense of variation,” further signaling an overarching sense of severance from Streisand’s preliminary performance. Furthermore, another review in a Cambridge publication called The Tab – though less benevolent overall to Burns’ casting decisions – does not mention Streisand’s name once, even in a cursory way, a feat that proves wholly rare within reviews of any of the aforementioned American incarnations of the show performed in recent decades.

Lily Parham as Fanny Brice in Cambridge Musical Theatre Society’s Funny Girl, November 2013

The marked absence of nods to Streisand’s original performance, and in turn, the apparent lack of a Streisand “shadow” in relation to Cambridge Musical Theatre Society’s November 2013 production of Funny Girl can be attributed to several factors. First and foremost, this incarnation of the piece was produced, directed, and performed by a more recreational group

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94 Ibid.  
95 Ibid.
of university students and likely evaluated with a less critical eye than any of its professional theatrical counterparts. Moreover, the fact that this particular production was performed in London indicates that Streisand’s shadow may have less of a global reach than originally thought. Though Streisand originated the role of Fanny Brice on London’s West End in April 1966, the lack of comparisons to her performance in the 2013 Cambridge production suggest that her far-reaching and continued associations with the role may simply be more prevalent for American audiences than international ones. Such a trend is most likely tied to Streisand’s eminent status as a symbol of Jewish-American pride in the early 1960s and beyond, a phenomenon clearly less resonant or meaningful for any individual situated outside the collective American consciousness that ostensibly elevated Streisand to the celebrity status she has occupied since her star turn in 1964.
V. A New Kind of *Funny Girl* for the Next Generation

Though numerous theatrical productions of *Funny Girl* have unquestionably been affected by Streisand’s shadow, a 2014 episode of Ryan Murphy’s FOX television series *Glee* indicates that a successful, large-scale production of the show is not a complete impossibility for the near-to-immediate future, though there *are* limits to the type of woman who can most effectively play the role of Fanny Brice. At various points throughout the series, *Glee*’s main character Rachel Berry, portrayed by an incredibly Jewish-looking Lea Michele, sings several songs made popular by Streisand: in the twentieth episode of the first season, for example, Rachel duets with her birth mother – an equally ethnic-looking Idina Menzel – on the title song from *Funny Girl*, and in other episodes she has also sung “You Are Woman, I Am Man,” “My Man,” and “Don’t Rain on My Parade.” Furthermore, the show’s fourth and fifth seasons prominently feature a storyline in which Rachel is cast as Fanny Brice in a fictional Broadway re-mounting of *Funny Girl*. The storyline culminates in the fifth season episode “Frenemies,” originally aired on February 25th, 2014, in which Rachel pays tribute to the real-life persona of Streisand by donning a lookalike of her 1968 Academy Awards ensemble. Written by Ned Martel, this episode also follows the casting of Rachel’s understudy, her high school “frenemy” Santana, played by Naya Rivera.

By casting Rachel as Fanny Brice – even in a Broadway revival of *Funny Girl* within the fictionalized world of *Glee* – Murphy reinforces the importance of an ethnically Jewish “look” when casting women in the role of Fanny Brice. Though raised Catholic, Michele is of Italian-Catholic and Spanish-Jewish descent, and possesses an “aggressively” ethnic looking face in the same vein as Kritzer, Gasteyer – and of course, Streisand herself. Moreover, Rachel’s understudy, Santana, played by Naya Rivera, is not Jewish: her ethnic background is one-half
Puerto Rican, one-quarter African-American, and one-quarter German. First and foremost, because Santana does not “code” as ethnically Jewish, her presence serves to heighten Rachel’s equivalence to both Streisand and Brice. Additionally, the placement of a woman hailing from such divergent ethnic makeup as Michele’s understudy suggests and reinforces limits to the type of woman who can most fully, accurately, and successfully portray Brice, and thus, Streisand. *Glee* pokes fun at this sentiment when Rachel shouts at Santana, “Fanny Brice is a New York Jew – you playing that role is like me being the grand marshal of the Puerto Rican day parade!”

It is arguable that the biographical nature of *Funny Girl* necessitates a white, Jewish woman to play Fanny Brice in any incarnation of the show – theatrical, filmic, or otherwise – but executive producer Murphy’s decision to cast Michele as Brice and Rivera as her understudy is undoubtedly rooted at least somewhat in the two women’s particular ethnic identities. The result of this casting ultimately signals overarching ethnic and cultural limits to the woman who ultimately can and cannot – successfully, at least – step into the role of Fanny Brice, either real life or in a fictional universe like that of *Glee*.

Accordingly, in “Frenemies,” the differences between Rachel and Santana’s ability to channel Streisand are highly distinguishable: Santana works as an unhappy, struggling waitress in a New York City diner while Rachel attends casting meetings for the production of *Funny Girl* in which she has been granted the role of Brice. Prior to Santana’s appointment as understudy, Rachel offers to score Santana a gig “in the background” of a magazine photo shoot that aims to introduce Rachel to the world as the next and newest “funny girl.” However, Santana is only able participate in the musical number – in which Rachel dons a replica of Streisand’s 1968 Academy

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96 Ned Martel (Writer) and Bradley Buecker (Director), 2014, “Frenemies” [5x09], Ryan Murphy (Executive Producer), *Glee* (Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox Television).
Awards ensemble, further solidifying her connection to Streisand’s real-life persona – as part of an elaborate, imagined dream sequence:

Lea Michele Channels Barbra Streisand in Glee’s 5x09 “Frenemies” (February 24th, 2014)

Moreover, though Santana sings the Funny Girl signature “Don’t Rain on My Parade” when she auditions for the understudy of Fanny Brice – specifically for the understudy role, as her ethnic background likely did not permit her to audition for the role in its fullest sense – she dons a simple turquoise dress instead of costuming like the Oscars outfit that actively works to align Rachel with Streisand just moments before. “Don’t Rain on My Parade” is also the first Funny Girl song that Santana has sung in the series, while Rachel has sung a host of Streisand signatures and other songs from Funny Girl throughout the previous five seasons. This deliberate conflation of Rachel Berry with Streisand-as-Brice, juxtaposed by the inability of Santana to

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wholly claim the role, further reinforces limits to the casting choices for contemporary productions of *Funny Girl* yet to come.

![Image: Naya Rivera Sings “Don’t Rain on My Parade” in *Glee*’s 5x09 “Frenemies” (February 24th, 2014)](image)

Naya Rivera Sings “Don’t Rain on My Parade” in *Glee*’s 5x09 “Frenemies” (February 24th, 2014)

However, to focus more specifically on the layered positioning of Lea Michele as Rachel Berry, a fictional character channeling Streisand-as-Brice in the illusory world of *Glee*, is to posit the notion that a commercially successful Broadway production of *Funny Girl* may soon be within reach. Though it employs a decidedly heightened version of realism in its storytelling, *Glee* presents to its viewers a contemporary reality that seems campy yet plausible; what is more, the show draws upon real-life references in a potentially decisive attempt to corroborate and bring its plotlines to an actualized, non-fictional state outside the show itself. For example, in “Frenemies,” *Funny Girl*’s casting director calls upon real-life critics from the New York theatrical scene, citing important *New York Times* theatre critic Pat Healy, *Time Out New York*’s

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98 Ibid.
Theater Editor David Cote, and Playbill CEO Adam Hetrick. Details such as these, though small, align *Glee’s* fictional world with the real world of twenty-first century society and subtly suggest that the universe Rachel Berry inhabits could easily exist in the same world as *Glee’s* viewers.

In the fall of 2013, *Glee* also altered the reality of the New York theatrical community for purposes of filming footage to accompany the fictionalized production of *Funny Girl* happening within its episodes: on September 9th, Michele-as-Berry was photographed standing under a faux marquee for *Glee’s Funny Girl* at Broadway’s St. James Theatre on West 44th Street.

![Lea Michele filming Glee at the St. James Theatre, New York City (2013)](image)

99 Lea Michele (msleamichele), “#GleeinNYC #FunnyGirl #Bway,” September 9, 2013, Instagram.
This was a literal conversion of a Broadway house to a “fictional” world, yet simultaneously an assertion of that same fictional world in reality. This also suggested the possibility of a Fanny Brice for the new century, as Lea Michele’s social media channels and real-life media outlets as varied as BroadwayWorld.com and Perez Hilton reported on Glee’s literal and striking presence on Broadway. Such assertions of fiction-cum-reality also couple with Michele’s real-life bids at the role of Fanny Brice throughout the early 2010s: a highly vocal fan of Ms. Streisand, Michele performed “Don’t Rain on My Parade” during the live 2010 Tony Award telecast and “My Man” at the 2011 Musicares Tribute to Barbra Streisand, among others.

Barbra Streisand with her 1968 Academy Award for Funny Girl (1968) and Lea Michele as Rachel Berry on Glee in 5x09, “Frenemies” (2014)100

100 Lea Michele (msleamichele), “Tonight on the set of #Glee @BarbraStreisand,” November 23, 2013, Instagram.
In a March 2014 interview with *Teen Vogue*, Michele confirmed that *Glee* producer Ryan Murphy had recently obtained the rights, previously owned by Bob Boyett, to the stage show of *Funny Girl*. This news, paired with each of Murphy’s above attempts to equate *Glee*’s fictional world with reality and Michele’s vociferous public adoration of Streisand, indicate that a revival of *Funny Girl* starring Michele as Fanny Brice has the potential to become a reality in the near future. Furthermore, *Glee*’s overarching mainstream popularity and viewership dominated by younger audiences suggest that viewers of the show – the bulk of potential ticket targets for a Michele-helmed production – had little familiarity with Streisand’s portrayal of Brice, let alone Brice herself. “Frenemies,” for example, garnered 2.92 million total viewers on its original airdate and had a Nielsen rating of 1.2 for the 18-49 demographic. 1.2 denotes a sizeable quantity of young viewers, most of whom have made little, if any, connection between Michele, Streisand, and Brice; this allows greater inherent possibility for Michele to flourish in the role of Brice than her stage predecessors Gibson, Kritzer, Gasteyer, and Ambrose, whether on *Glee*’s fictional stage or in a bona-fide Broadway theater.

Michele’s portrayal of an ambitious Jewish adolescent on the rise on a highly popular mainstream television show is, of course, possible because of women like Streisand who paved the way for Jewish women in mainstream American culture through the 1968 film version of *Funny Girl*, as well as her later career triumphs like *Yentl*. More than that, within the context of

103 For the evening of February 25th, 2014, the 1.2 Nielsen rating for ages 18-49 is most similar to that of Fox’s *New Girl* (1.4), the CW’s *Supernatural* (1.1), and *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (1.1), all shows with predominantly younger audiences, indicating that the majority of individuals within that particular statistic skew towards the lower end of the age range. For more ratings and context, see Konodology’s “TV Ratings Tuesday: ‘NCIS’ & ‘Person of Interest’ Hit Lows, ‘Glee’ Rises + ‘Mind Games’ has Soft Debut.”
Glee, the Jewish ethnicity that aligns the ambitious Rachel Berry with Streisand, and thus, Brice, is certainly not obscured or compromised to great extent. Unlike Streisand, who physically altered her appearance, and Streisand, who altered the spelling of her name, Michele-as-Berry loudly and routinely proclaims the ethnicity that makes her suitable for the role of Fanny Brice in Glee’s fictional mounting of Funny Girl – albeit in incredibly campy, droll ways.

Such vociferous pride can likely be attributed to several factors: first and foremost, the notion of what it means to “be American” has widely expanded since the period in which Jewish ethnicity was first beginning to represented in mainstream American culture via vehicles such as the stage and film versions of Funny Girl. The once-stringent parameters of American identity were just beginning to shift and expand during the time period in which Streisand began her ascent to celebrity in the early 1960s as an entire generation of immigrants’ American-born children matured; moreover, those parameters have only continued to expand in the years since as assimilating representations of Jewish and myriad other cultures have continued to make their way into theatre, film, and television. Secondly, female Jewish performers are no longer as much of a cultural anomaly as they were in Brice, and even Streisand’s days. As such, female performers like Michele’s are more generally and prominently able to play a variety of roles for which ethnicity may be an prominent component – like that of Rachel Berry on Glee – without compromising themselves either physically or metaphorically, at least not to the extent that was essentially required for Brice and Streisand’s respective eras. In her 2010 essay “One Clove Away from a Pomander Ball: The Subversive Tradition of Jewish Female Comedians,” Joyce Antler affirms that “a quarter-century of performances of Saturday Night Live comedians and highly visible female comics of all ethnicities have broadened the theatrical types that women
“[can] play” and the venues in which they can lucratively play them. Indeed, Jewish women as diverse as Joan Rivers, Gilda Radner, Wendy Wasserstein, Judy Gold, and Sarah Silverman have to some extent “normalized” Jewish ethnicity within the context of popular American culture, with each generation aiding its subsequent one to make large-scale, ethnically-charged performances like Michele-as-Berry’s all the more feasible in 2014 and beyond.

VI. Conclusion: “Where Are You Now?”

In the early twentieth-century period in which Fanny Brice rose to greatest prominence, there was one singular idea of what it meant to “be American” – one that certainly did not encapsulate a bawdy woman with an appearance as aggressively ethnic as Brice’s. Only when Brice altered herself physically, performing under the pretext of a child was she able to gain recognition on national scale in a xenophobic United States that was then restricting its borders to immigrants both literally and metaphorically. As an entirely American-born generation of immigrants’ children eventually grew, however, so too did notions of American identity. Three decades later, Streisand burst upon the New York theatre scene at a moment in “being American” could mean any variety of things as notions of shifting and expanding identity were probed in both popular culture and society at large. Moreover, though *Funny Girl* therefore marks one of the first instances in which Jewish ethnicity and identity were explored via mediums as wide-reaching as Broadway theatre – and eventually, feature film – Jewish ethnicity has since become by and large “normalized” within the new millennium thanks to Streisand and her various Jewish contemporaries and successors of stage and screen.

While the scope of exposure for a show and character as ethnically-centered as *Funny Girl* and Fanny Brice have shifted extensively during the era in which Fanny Brice performed, there are limits to the particular brand of Jewish ethnicity that *Glee* presents to its millions of viewers in 2014, implying a potential trend in American popular culture as a whole. For example, though main character Rachel Berry is ambitious and unabashed in the ethnic aspects of her appearance and persona that align her with the role of Brice – or perhaps more appositely, Streisand-as-Brice – explicitly religious aspects of her Jewish background are hardly represented, as is essentially the case in the ethnically-skewed yet highly secular *Funny Girl* itself. Moreover,
Berry’s Jewish ethnicity, though a prevalent component of her persona, is often highlighted to merely serve the punch line of a joke in the highly campy, heightened world of *Glee*. These caveats, though few, do suggest constraints to the overall measure of non-purely American ethnicity that can be widely and effectively consumed within the United States of the millennial era, particularly in vehicles as predominant as a show broadcast on network television like *Glee*.

Nevertheless, more than half a century after a young Barbra Streisand took the spotlight at Broadway’s Winter Garden Theatre in 1964, the piece that propelled her to stardom suddenly seems more relevant than ever. *Funny Girl* celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of its Broadway debut in late March 2014, and with Ryan Murphy’s all-too topical acquisition of the show’s rights just prior, a large-scale revival seems poised to take shape in the not-so-distant future. Despite the fact that fifty years have passed since its initial production, Streisand’s inciting performance as Fanny Brice also remains significant: her rendering of the fictionalized version of Brice both on stage and in the film version of *Funny Girl* in the 1960s was not a mere ephemeral interpretation, as is often the case in live theatre. It has instead become embedded within the piece forever: Streisand-as-Brice is no longer an iteration of the text, but the text itself.

Inventive casting methodology utilized by the Cambridge Musical Theatre Society in their November 2013 production, along with those employed by Center Theatre Group via the wide-reaching “Let It Cast” platform, only further solidify the challenge Streisand’s shadow continues to pose to theatre-makers attempting to stage a modern production of *Funny Girl*. Whether or not the Center Theatre Group production was halted because Boyett’s team feared that Ms. Ambrose – a classically trained television star, though one of primarily Italian and German, not Jewish, heritage – could not live up to Streisand’s looming image remains uncertain.
to patrons and industry insiders alike.¹⁰⁵ Yet the pinnacle role of Fanny Brice in this “uniquely unrevivable” show remains daunting for any females who are granted the opportunity to tackle it in a professional, or even amateur, capacity.¹⁰⁶

American theatre-makers may simply have to wait until the infiltration of an entirely new generation of ticket-buyers for which Streisand’s alliance with Fanny Brice means little to nothing; after all, *Funny Girl* debuted on Broadway more than a decade after Fanny Brice’s death in 1951, a time period evidently expansive enough to allow Streisand to successfully create her fictional interpretation of “a largely forgotten Jewish icon” without the stigma of Brice’s own image looming over the production, at least not arrestingly enough to stunt Streisand’s triumph.¹⁰⁷ Lea Michele’s venture in claiming the role of Fanny Brice on *Glee* suggests that such a new generation with little to no familiarity with the show-stunting Streisand “phenomenon” may already beginning to take shape, especially with Ryan Murphy’s recent repossession of *Funny Girl*’s rights. However, while the inherent star-making nature of the role might someday allow a blossoming, unknown starlet to claim her own slice of fame should a Broadway revival ever come to fruition, the far-reaching cultural associations of Streisand’s uncanny alliance with Brice’s persona within the collective global consciousness will likely reign supreme in the wings for decades to come, if not eternally.

¹⁰⁵ See Appendix for Ambrose’s headshot. Like Debbie Gibson, Ambrose’s almost ceramic-looking face is much less “aggressively ethnic”-looking than Streisand’s.
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*Cover Image: Barbra Streisand as Fanny Brice in William Wyler’s *Funny Girl* (1968)
Appendix

Barbra Streisand (1968)  
Fanny Brice: 1964

Debbie Gibson (2010)  
Fanny Brice: 1996

Leslie Kritzer (2007)  
Fanny Brice: 2001

Ana Gasteyer (2006)  
Fanny Brice: 2003

Lauren Ambrose (2007)  
Fanny Brice: 2012

Lea Michele (2006)  
Fanny Brice: 2014

Source: Playbill Vault