Frank Zappa and musical theatre: ugly ugly o'phan Annie and really deep, intense, thought-provoking Broadway symbolism.

Paul Carr and Richard J. Hand, University of Glamorgan

At first glance it probably seems implausible if not preposterous to associate Frank Zappa (1940-93) with Musical Theatre. However, although he is generally recognised as a significant figure in the broad history of Rock music, his idiosyncrasy makes his output genuinely unique in comparison to conventional Rock oeuvres. Specifically, not only was Zappa renowned for being a highly theatrical performer and artist but one of the key distinguishing features in his work is a preoccupation with narrative and it is through the consideration of narrative that we are most able to conceptualise his work as Musical Theatre. On a microcosmic level, a sense of dramatic narrative informs many of Zappa's songs; but on a macrocosmic level, too, his oeuvre as a whole can be interpreted as containing a narrative continuity. Moreover, the concept structure of Zappa's albums – quintessentially in *Joe's Garage, Acts 1, 2 and 3* (1979) and *Thing-Fish* (1984) – creates an extended (and again dramatic) narrative that is more akin to the structure of Musical Theatre than conventional pop and rock album structuring. In addition, Zappa demonstrates an acute awareness of performance traditions and genres outside of those which, obviously, appertain to popular music and classical music: for example, *Thing-Fish* is an explicit exploration of Broadway Musical Theatre. This essay will propose that the work of Frank Zappa should be considered as Musical Theatre through a detailed critical investigation of the artist and the oeuvre.

Zappa remains one of the most prolific and versatile composers in the history of the popular music canon, whose unerring ability to fuse late 1950s do-wop, rhythm and

blues, rock, jazz, disco, reggae, new wave, *musique concrète*, electronic, and serial techniques makes him a fascinating figure not least in relation to musical theatre in the broadest sense. Zappa consistently engaged with both low and high cultural forms throughout his career and musicological analysis of much of his portfolio reveals a unique juxtaposition of these numerous styles, a factor which is largely responsible for the erratic genre labelling his music often receives.[1] When discussing the 'classical' influences inherent in his early portfolio he verifies a clear intention to gradually educate his audience into comprehending what could be regarded as his more inaccessible future efforts, stating 'Stravinsky in rock n' roll is like a get-acquainted offer… It's a gradual progression to bring in my own "serious" music'. (Slaven 2003: 82). It is a fascinating irony that the manipulation Zappa so obviously deplored in government and authority, was in reality a technique he calculatedly utilised on his audience. The above statement is a microcosm of the long-term unwritten contract Zappa forged with his audience, which in turn presented him with an unparalleled amount of artistic freedom. As evidenced in live recordings such as *Ahead of Their Time* (1968), Frank Zappa is probably unique in presenting an evening of Theatre of the Absurd and alternative comedy combined with music heavily influenced by the Second Viennese School and have the music industry describe and package the event as 'Rock'. Given Zappa's obsessive exploration of, and experimentation with, different modes and forms of performance it comes as little surprise that his oeuvre contains both oblique and explicit examples of musical theatre.

Aside from the compositions themselves, the ambiguity of Zappa's genre classification is also emphasized by a number of 'external' contexts, such as the packaging of his albums, the promotion of his live concerts, the polemical political views

outlined in his interviews and compositions, the behavioural patterns and dress code of both his band and audience, the broad cultural reception of his music, the hierarchical relationship of himself to his group members, and the focus of this article: the complex theatricality of his music and performances especially in his exploration of musical theatre. The numerous musicians who worked with Zappa were required not only to be virtuoso musical performers, but also capable of participating in what were essentially theatrical stage shows. This engagement ranged from the obligatory 'rock and roll stage presence', to stand up comedy, to the performance of dramatic sketches and satirical radio plays such as 'Billy the Mountain' (*Just Another Band from L.A.* 1972). Looked at in this way, it is hard to think of a composer-musician as thoroughly *dramatic* as Frank Zappa. His recordings and concerts abound with comedy, personae, moods and stories. In his albums, Zappa's theatricality is perhaps most explicitly evident in his two most developed examples of musical theatre: *Joe's Garage, Acts 1, 2 and 3* (1979) and *Thing-Fish* (1984).

In examining these two examples of musical theatre, it is evident that they can either be seen as *dramatic narratives with music* or *musical narratives with drama*. These interpretations perhaps vary according to the bias of one's discipline, but what is incontrovertible is the primacy of a principal narrative in these works: it is the presence of a central narrative which brings these works into the realm of musical theatre. Moreover, in both cases this central narrative is radically satirical. Throughout his oeuvre, Zappa is an artist preoccupied with performance narrative and it is an impetus that is apparent from the very beginnings of his career.

The creation of his two musicals *Joe's Garage* and *Thing-Fish* is inevitable in

hindsight when one considers that he was composing theatrical works in the early 1960s including what Neil Slaven regards as 'the world's first "rock opera"' (Slaven 2003: 39) *I Was a Teenage Maltshop* and the film script *Captain Beefheart Vs The Grunt People*, as well as the score for two movies, *The World's Greatest Sinner* (Timothy Carey 1962) and *Run Home, Slow* (Tim Sullivan 1965). Zappa's early film music composition instils an awareness of cinematic narrative that is also evidenced with songs that explicitly draw on, or allude to, film such as 'Cheepnis' (*Roxy & Elsewhere* 1974) – his tribute to sci-fi B-movie forms which creates a sweeping narrative from the spectator purchasing a hotdog to the story told in the on-screen creature feature – or works such as 'The Adventures of Greggery Peccary' (*Studio Tan* 1978), Zappa's surrealistic tale of a nocturnal wild pig who drives to work in a 'little red Volkswagen to the ugly part of town where they keep the Government Buildings', which is like an epic cartoon without visual images.

Zappa formed The Mothers of Invention in 1965 after pursuing a freelance career as a professional musician since leaving high school in 1958, gaining experience as a jobbing musician, film composer, studio owner, and songwriter. Zappa's earliest influences would include Rhythm and Blues combined with an almost alter ego compulsion for twentieth-century classical music, in particular the work of Edgard Varèse and the French composer's concept of music as organised noise. The original line up of The Mothers of Invention signed to Verve in 1966 and released their debut album *Freak Out* the same year.

After the successful formation of the Mothers of Invention in the mid-1960s, the concept of narrative continues to be important for the rest of his career with evident

highpoints of realisation with *Joe's Garage* and *Thing-Fish* and some unfortunately unrealised projects such as a musical based on the life of Lenny Bruce and the sci-fi musical *Hunchentoot* (see Courrier 2002: 391 and 243). On a microcosmic level, Zappa creates numerous narrative-driven songs. In American popular music of the 1970s there are a number of romantic narrative songs such as Dean Friedman's 'Lucky Stars' (1978) or Rupert Holmes's 'Escape (The Pina Colada Song)' (1979). These find a precursive Zappa antidote in 'Honey, Don't You Want a Man Like Me?' (*Zappa In New York* 1976) and 'Bobby Brown (Goes Down)' (*Baby Snakes* 1977): not fables of reconciliation or studies of life's little ironies but penetrating sexual and social satires in narrative form. With this in mind it is no surprise that his forthcoming experiments in musical theatre will be similarly satirical. Indeed, Zappa is probably best understood as a thoroughgoing social satirist even in his most populist efforts: as Michel Delville and Andrew Norris observe, 'Zappa's own attempts to write songs that could be played on the radio always contain elements of social and/or formal satire ("Bobby Brown", "Dancing Fool", "Valley Girl")' (Delville and Norris 2005: 22). It is additionally significant that these songs are blatant first-person narratives. Some of Zappa's other musical narratives are specifically autobiographical, recounting his childhood and adolescence[2], or the group – and, indeed, *groupie* – folklore of his bands on the road[3]: contemporary events which Zappa rapidly turned into narrative songs. Zappa was even imprisoned for the creation of a narrative: in 1964 he was paid to produce an audiotape of various sexual acts. The project was really an instance of police entrapment, and although it was, in Zappa's words, merely a 'bogus sex tape' (quoted in Slaven 2003: 42) it did not save Zappa from a short term in prison. Zappa would later have his revenge by using genuine recordings of

his wife reaching orgasm as an authentic sexual narrative within the bleakness of 'The Torture Never Stops' (*Zoot Allures* 1976). Sex and sexuality is frequently both a target and a weapon (a quite deliberately 'offensive' one) for Frank Zappa: his incarceration, albeit brief, and the evidence of the controversy evoked by his explorations of the taboo throughout his career was obviously defining and self-perpetuating for an artist who had an appetite for provocation and reaction. In particular, Zappa's musicals will exploit sexual taboo in order to create profoundly satirical visions and narratives: the romantic and sentimental concept of love so often extolled in musical theatre is replaced in *Joe's Garage* and *Thing-Fish* by a disruptive and eviscerating satirical use of sex and sexuality, at times revealing a seemingly voyeuristic relationship with the subject mater.

Writing in 1972, the American theatre practitioner Joseph Chaikin lamented that we cannot say 'I Love You' without being bombarded by a million Hollywood clichés which reveal how our minds have been colonised by unattainable cultural paradigms (see Chaikin 1972: 72-73). For Zappa it is not the movies but a million love songs. Describing the genre as 'the ultimate form of absurdist comedy' (Keel 1979: 77), he stated – 'I detest love lyrics. I think one of the causes of bad mental health in the United States is that people have been raised on "love lyrics"' (Zappa 1989: 89). In *Cruising with Rubin and the Jets* (1968) Zappa ironically celebrates the idiocy of popular songs about love, static non-narratives and extolments of mythic states of being that go nowhere. In other works in the 1960s, Zappa gleefully subverts these conventions: in 'Wowie Zowie' (*Freak Out* 1966) the cliché of 'Love me do… and I'll love you too… I'll be true' etc. is surprisingly ruptured by the realism of 'I don't even care if you brush your teeth… I don't even care if you shave your legs…'. It is such moments in Zappa that reflect the legacy of Spike

Jones, another great American music dramatist with a penchant for comedy who Zappa acknowledges as a major influence (Zappa 1989: 172). Indeed, it is more than a coincidence that *Thing-Fish* characters Harry and Rhonda sound uncannily like the voices of Boy (Spike Jones) and Girl (Helen Grayco) from Jones's 1948 micro-opera 'None But The Lonely Heart (A Soaperetta)'. In songs such as 'Cocktails for Two' (1943), Spike Jones and his City Slickers take us on a journey from the mundane conventions of romance to musical mayhem, while in 'My Old Flame' (1947) the journey is even more disruptive: the first half of the song is played straight with what seem to be romantic lyrics but changes into a gruesome tale of dismemberment. The ruptures within these songs create distinct narratives which startle and amuse and in so doing liberate us. Regarding this concept Zappa himself stated:

> My idea of a good time is a really simple minded song followed by something that is out to lunch, and then back to simplicity again, and then back out to lunch again. That's the way the world really is… (Zappa 1983: 97).

It is apparent that Zappa sees reality as a series of ruptured and disharmonic narratives, qualities which, when combined with sexual satire, will make his experiments in musical theatre so interesting.

The song 'Joe's Garage' is a work that comprises a number of audacious leaps and surprising ruptures. The song presents the story of post-war popular music, but it is also a *bildungsroman* in musical form. We hear the history and trajectory of popular music from do-wop through cocktail to rock and new wave as well as, simultaneously, the biography of Joe – Zappa's 'Everyman' – from his first band to stardom to the encounter with authority in the form of the police who bring the song to an end. But, of

course, the microcosmic narrative of 'Joe's Garage' forms part of the epic, three-act narrative *Joe's Garage*, Zappa's satirical and futuristic portrayal of a society run by a totalitarian and theocratic government which has made music illegal. As a biography of a musician it is a forerunner to works such as *Buddy! The Buddy Holly Story* (1989) or more appositely, given its political and satirical dynamic, Alan Bleasdale's Elvis Presley musical-biography *Are You Lonesome Tonight?* (1987). Zappa, however, pushes satire much further making *Joe's Garage* a kind of William Hogarth's *The Rake's Progress* (1735)[4] meets George Orwell's *1984* (1948): Zappa presents Joe's decline and fall as due to him being at the mercy of a brutal regime which seeks to outlaw all forms of music. The quasi-science fiction of *Joe's Garage* – its depiction of a dystopian future and its robots (albeit designed for sexual gratification and sanctioned by L. Ron Hoover and the First Church of Appliantology)[5] – makes the work an ironic precursor to the sci-fi musical theatre of Bob Carlton's *Return to the Forbidden Planet* (1989) and Zappa's most complete example of the sci-fi musical genre given that the ambitious *Hunchentoot* remained unrealised. Carlton's work is structured around cover versions of rock n' roll songs. In *Joe's Garage* Zappa also includes a number of cover versions but they are arrangements of his own compositions, a central tenet in Zappa's practice and one which will be returned to in due course.

The three-act *Joe's Garage* is a work of musical theatre, but more appositely it is an *ironic musical*, if not an outright *anti-musical*. It is a work that is consistently ironic in its drama and its lyrics, not least in the line 'You'll love it! It's a way of life' which is used by a variety of characters and ironically reveals different facets of the dystopia the hero Joe finds himself in: the line is used by the Central Scrutinizer, the narrative host

(referring to parking regulations when loading and unloading); Sy Borg, the sex robot (a programmed statement advocating sex with machines); and Larry the road manager (in order to coerce a young woman into life as a groupie). *Joe's Garage* also includes melodramatic elements[6] such as the 'villainous' Central Scrutinizer – performed by Zappa using a toy megaphone to distort his voice – who narrates and mediates the story. It is interesting that Zappa casts himself in this iniquitous role: Kevin Courrier emphasises the stark contrast between this and Roger Daltry's choice to play the idealized and 'easily identifiable good guy' (Courrier 2002: 19) in *Tommy* (Ken Russell 1975). Indeed, Courrier draws a parallel between Zappa playing the Central Scrutinizer and the role he came to construct for himself in his live performances: 'an enigmatic impresario… like the Joel Grey devil-doll of *Cabaret*' (Courrier 2002: 19).

Returning to the structuring narrative of *Joe's Garage*, there is also the key melodramatic ingredient of love interest: Joe and Mary. Zappa's choice of their names (i.e. Joseph and Mary) is deliberately irreligious and supremely ironic. The couple will never get together as Zappa denies us conventional closure. However, this is probably another aspect of Zappa's anti-religious satire: Joe, who used to 'Hold hands / And think Pure Thoughts' with Mary at the church club, loses her when she skips her date with Joe: 'she was sucking cock backstage…/ In order to get a pass / To see some big rock group for free'. Mary's sexual initiation is more maculate than her namesake's immaculate union but it is nonetheless a key moment in Joe's journey. The lack of romantic resolution makes *Joe's Garage* an anti-musical inasmuch as Zappa forgoes the idealism and narrative closure of many examples of musical theatre. As such Zappa's musical theatre makes an interesting comparison with his contemporary Stephen Sondheim, a

major figure of mainstream American musical theatre, who, in works like *Company* (1970) and *Assassins* (1991) has produced anti-musicals inasmuch as they are works that similarly challenge the formal style and content of 'conventional' musical theatre.

Joe's Garage simply peters out or more exactly concludes with metadramatic aplomb: he abandons his toy megaphone not long after having declared '"Who gives a fuck anyway?' and ends with a heavily ironic 'big number'. The closing number 'Little Green Rosetta' offers no happy ever after dénouement but is a deliberately irritating and banal song about mass industrial cake decorating:

> A little green rosetta
> A little green rosetta
> A little green rosetta
> A little green rosetta
> You'll make a muffin betta
> With a green rosetta
> A little green rosetta
> A tiny green rosetta
> ('Little Green Rosetta' *Joe's Garage, Acts 2 and 3* 1979)

At the same time, it is an internationally unifying song as Zappa makes clear between the choruses:

> Good God! You're really jammin'! Now the Reggae version, hey, for the People in the Third World… we haven't forgotten anybody on this song… for all of you French people… who think that you're outta sight… And for the people in Spain… who think the French people are where it's at… And for the people in Mongolia who always wanted to go to Spain for a vacation… And for those of you in Taiwan who got chumped, this chorus is for you…
> ('Little Green Rosetta' *Joe's Garage, Acts 2 and 3* 1979)

Overall, however, 'Little Green Rosetta' is a finale as cynical as William Hogarth's final engraving 'Tailpiece, or the Bathos' (1764) an image of lethargy, exhaustion and entropy.

In Zappa's 'Little Green Rosetta' we see a world where we will all give up music and work in a muffin factory.

The narrative of *Joe's Garage* can be seen as an example of musical theatre which broadly alludes to some pre-existing works and is a precursor to others ranging, as we have seen, from Hogarth and The Who to Alan Bleasdale and Bob Carlton. But it is not just a process of broad, generic strokes: on a microcosmic level too, Zappa employs various allusionary mechanisms in *Joe's Garage* through which musical quotation is incorporated to intimate a variety of extra-musical references. The work is in fact a masterpiece of meticulous intertextuality, in which Zappa skillfully aligns numerous musical paradigms to contextual sources. Some of these references can be considered as 'self-quotation' and are *internal* to his catalogue, and are either subliminally incorporated using *xenochronic*[7] techniques, or through more overt forms of self-reference. Xenochrony was a studio-based technique developed by Zappa that was essentially an extension of his 'conceptual continuity' philosophy, enabling him to fuse recordings from unrelated time and places. This technique enabled him to superimpose 'unrelated' guitar solos (and sometimes additional instruments), usually from live recordings, into his studio projects. After initially experimenting with the technique as the producer of Captain's Beefheart's 'The Blimp' (*Trout Mask Replica* 1969), it became a pervasive creative aspect of his portfolio. Apart from 'Watermelon in Easter Hay', all of the songs in *Joe's Garage, Acts 1, 2 and 3* contain xenochronic guitar solos. Additionally, he also makes *external* allusion to the canon at large, through what he described as 'Archetypal American Musical Icons' (Zappa 1989: 166). With reference to this Zappa stated:

I've developed a 'formula' for what these timbres *mean* (to me, at least), so that

> when I create an arrangement… If I have access to the right instrumental resources… I can put sounds together that tell *more than the story in the lyrics,* especially to American listeners, [who are] raised on these subliminal clichés, shaping their audio reality from the cradle to the elevator (Zappa 1989: 171).

Zappa was noticeably very aware of the semantic potential of music, and he used this to great effect in order to substantiate the depth of his work. According to Zappa, 'Archetypal American Musical Icons' are used in his work to put a 'spin on any lyric within their vicinity. When present, these modules suggest that you interpret these lyrics within parenthesis' (Zappa 1989: 166). Indicative examples of this practice in *Joe's Garage* include quotations of 'Wipe Out' (2.54), 'Nite Owl' (3.38), allusions to The Beatles' 'Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band' (2.00) in the title track, and Richard Strauss's '*Also Sprach Zarathustra*' (2.33) and 'Mo 'n Herbs Vacation' (2.11) in 'Fembot in a Wet T Shirt'. On occasion these musical icons do not literally quote melodic fragments, but are clear examples of Philip Tagg's 'sonic anaphones', providing a 'quasi-programmatic, onomatopoeic stylisation of non-musical sound' (Tagg 2003: 99), such as the 'guitar whistle' during 'Fembot in a Wet T-Shirt' (2.39), or the 'percussive urine' at the start of 'Why Does it Hurt When I Pee?' (00.04). Some of the melodic and textual materials that Zappa uses also function as distinct examples of *leitmotif*, providing emotive depth to the characters, and emphasizing Zappa's determination to ensure the whole work of musical theatre provides a structural context for the individual parts. Examples of these practices include the aforementioned 'You'll love it! It's a way of life' line and the string bend motif during 'Joe's Garage' (1.00 and 1.36), repeated during 'Outside Now' (00.26).

One particular piece from *Joe's Garage* which is particularly fruitful when

analyzed is ‘Catholic Girls’. This song incorporates the internal and external allusions and the practice of musical iconography outlined above at a most ambitious level. Before it was incorporated into the musical theatre narrative of *Joe’s Garage*, this song was intended as a sarcastic antidote for the highly controversial ‘Jewish Princess’ (*Sheik Yerbouti* 1979), the only work in Zappa’s portfolio to attract an official complaint when the Anti-Defamation League of the B’nai B’rith accused Zappa of anti-Semitism. Not only did Zappa refuse to apologize for the controversial narrative of ‘Jewish Princess’, but exercised his First Amendment rights by including its principal motif toward the end of ‘Catholic Girls’ (3.17), cleverly aligning the political sensitivity of both subject matters into an incredibly sarcastic union. In the same song, Zappa also externally refers more subliminally on two occasions to Frank Sinatra’s ‘All The Way’ (00.45 and 2.27), the tone of its ‘jazz club’ delivery, and the Mafioso associations of its initiator somehow accentuating the intended humour of the piece. Moreover, one is reminded of the apocryphal truism that ‘90 per cent of Americans born in the 1950s were conceived to the sound of Frank Sinatra’. Such external allusions are further expanded upon at the end of the work through the inclusion of a vocal parody of ‘*La donna è mobile*’ (from Verdi’s *Rigoletto*) (3.43), and a heavily disguised ‘Calabrian Tarrentella’ (3.22 and 3.30). The four minutes nineteen seconds of ‘Catholic Girls’ is full of musical playfulness which substantiates the depth and theatrical impact of this work and this practice represents a microcosm of both Zappa’s musical theatre and the musicological devices he incorporates throughout his portfolio.

Within a few years, Zappa produced *Thing-Fish*, an even more ambitious example of musical theatre with an album cover which mischievously boasts ‘Original Cast

Recording' and includes full and detailed stage directions in its lyric book. The work is, in Kevin Courrier's words, 'a stinging satire of the Broadway stage' (Courrier 2002: 391). It is a conspiracy-ridden account of the rise of AIDS: the disease is presented as being produced in those 'TOP SECRET LABMO-TORIES de gubbnint keep stashed away underneath Virginia' ('Prologue' *Thing-Fish*). The work reveals how this government manufactured disease was targeted at 'fagnits' and 'severely-tanned individj'lls' (ibid.) and warns the listener that with regards to ruthless and, once again, religious fundamentalist government no-one is safe: no-one can guarantee that their 'number won't come up, next time de breeze blow fum de Easterly directium' ('Galoot Up-Date' *Thing-Fish*). Zappa originally featured the 1981 song 'Dumb All Over' on the *Thing-Fish* demo but omitted it from the final release. In this song he spells out the dangers that theocratic government poses to civilised society as we know it:

> Religious fanatics
> Can make it be all gone
> I mean it won't blow up
> 'N disappear
> It'll just look ugly
> For a thousand years… ('Dumb All Over' *You Are What You Is* 1981)

The duration of the regime that the religious right threatens to bring to the US – or any other nation for that matter – is deliberately allusive to Hitler's dream of a thousand year Reich and reveals the seriousness of Zappa's anxieties.

Zappa's anxieties may be profound and the irony may no longer be quite as deft or as pervasive as it was in *Joe's Garage*, but this does not prevent *Thing-Fish* from being a typically humorous example of radical and satirical musical theatre. Examples of radical and satirical musical theatre which most obviously offer a precedent to Zappa's *Thing-*

Fish include works such as Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's *Threepenny Opera* (1928) and, from Zappa's own national culture, Marc Blitzstein's consciously Brechtian *The Cradle Will Rock* (1937), a sweeping and acerbic allegory of capitalist America. Although neither is as sexually robust as Zappa's examples of musical theatre, they are equally satirically playful. To give a specific and apt example, 'Tango-Ballad' (*Threepenny Opera*) is a 'love duet' which is, in fact, a disruptive account of the brutal relationship between the sadistic Mack the Knife and the prostitute Jenny: as such, it is a precedent to some of the Harry and Rhonda episodes in *Thing-Fish* where the fundamental flaws of their dysfunctional relationship are exposed. The key difference between Brecht and Blitzstein and Zappa, however, is in politics. While Brecht and Blitzstein were socialists, Zappa was perhaps most centrally a non-partisan libertarian who would never associate himself with any political ideology, being highly suspicious of such affiliations.

Zappa's decision to combine AIDS with the satire of Broadway musical theatre perhaps finds an even more interesting parallel twenty years later in the film *Team America: World Police* (Trey Parker 2004). This film, itself a ruthless and often daring satire of America (this time post-9/11), features a Broadway musical within it entitled *Lease*, a title which simultaneously alludes to two hugely successful Broadway musicals: Jonathan Larson's *Rent* (1996) and Jim Jacobs and Warren Casey's *Grease* (1972). *Team America* features *Lease*'s closing number 'Everyone has AIDS!' the final chorus of which is:

> Everyone has AIDS!
> My grandma and my dog Ol' Blue (AIDS AIDS AIDS)
> The Pope has got it and so do you (AIDS AIDS AIDS AIDS AIDS)

> Come on everybody we got quilting to do (AIDS AIDS AIDS AIDS AIDS)
> We gotta break down these barricades
> Everyone has AIDS AIDS AIDS AIDS AIDS AIDS AIDS AIDS AIDS AIDS
> AIDS AIDS AIDS AIDS AIDS AIDS AIDS AIDS AIDS AIDS!
> (*Team America: World Police* 2004)

As well as targeting *Rent* and, to a lesser degree, *Grease*, *Lease* is clearly intentioned as a satirical treatment of self-satisfied and naïve political correctness and as such it is as 'cosy', 'heart warming' and 'empathetic' as *Thing-Fish* is eviscerating, paranoid and alienating. Nevertheless, there is a parallel inasmuch as both works use Broadway musical theatre as a forum and target for satire. Moreover, when *Team America* gives us glimpses of *Lease*'s audience – well-dressed and well-to-do bourgeois spectators dabbing the sentimental tears from their eyes – one is looking at numerous incarnations of Harry and Rhonda before they embark on their radical journey into *Thing-Fish*.

The framing narrative and style of *Thing-Fish* is that of a Broadway show including, centrally Harry and Rhonda, the two spectator-actors who have come to the wrong show. The work is an extraordinary example of bricolage, where 'objects, signs or practices are appropriated into different meaning systems and cultural settings and, as a result, are re-signified' (O'Sullivan *et al*., 1994, 33). Here, cultural icons and traditions are re-appropriated to Zappa's subversive and provocative ends.[8] The eponymous narrator is based on the similarly malapropistic Kingfish from the long-running radio – and, latterly, television – sitcom *Amos n' Andy* (1928-60). However, concurrent with Zappa drawing on a zenith of American popular culture, the eponymous Thing-Fish's dominating voice and commanding presence conducted through a consistently original and allusive wordplay is what inspires Delville and Norris to assert that '*Thing Fish* is Zappa's *Finnegans Wake*' (Delville and Norris 2005: 134). Returning to *Thing-Fish* as a

playful satire of the musical theatre form, other iconic and intertextual figures include the troupe of Mammy Nuns which are a satirical allusion to Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein's *The Sound of Music* (1959) while Harry and Rhonda, the straight yuppies who have wandered into the wrong show, fulfil a similar function to Brad and Janet in Richard O'Brien's *The Rocky Horror Show* (1973), but are extrapolated even further from trans-sexual Transylvania when it comes to Zappa's unsettling universe.

In 'Harry and Rhonda', Rhonda desires what she defines as the paradigm of musical theatre:

> I want fairies on a string over the audience! I want REAL BROADWAY ENTERTAINMENT! Feathers! Spot-lights! *Guilt!* Hours upon hours of *GUILT!* About my mother! About my father! About brave women, suffering at the hands of infantile, insensitive, dominating men!
> ('Harry & Rhonda' *Thing-Fish*)

The musical that Rhonda desires – she and her husband think they have come to see a Broadway show called *Dream Girls* – is a universe away from the one she finds herself in, which leads to the explicit, fetishistic and irreconcilable sexual awakenings of both Rhonda and Harry. For Rhonda this includes body piercings, fetishistic lactation and self-induced anal penetration with her initialised fountain pen. Harry's sexual awakening occurs when he realises his closeted desire to have a gay fling with one of the Mammy Nuns allowing a furious Rhonda to denounce him:

> HARRY, I used to think you were merely an OVER-EDUCATED SHIT-HEAD, but now that I finally have proof, it's going to give me GREAT PLEASURE to refer to you as an OVER-EDUCATED COCKSUCKER!
> ('Harry-As-A-Boy' *Thing-Fish*)

By the end of the musical, this condemnation of Harry takes on a national and even

international significance. Rhonda starts to dismiss Harry as ‘a useless ALL-AMERICAN “MAN-WORM”!’ (‘Drop Dead’ *Thing-Fish*) The most disgusting creature on the face of the earth’ and ultimately extols the triumph of the modern American woman over the un-evolved man-worm not worthy of any respect:

> You are the all-American cocksucker... jizzing all over your leather cocksucker costume after beating the snot out of yourself with a rubber MAMMY! (ibid.)

As bizarre as it may be, through Rhonda’s empowering triumph Zappa permits a resounding female success against the Broadway paradigm of, in Rhonda’s words, ‘women, suffering at the hands of infantile, insensitive, dominating men!’ (‘Harry & Rhonda’ *Thing-Fish*)

In addition to subverting and satirising certain narrative conventions of Broadway in *Thing-Fish*, Zappa also explores the stylistic conventions of musical theatre with moments of what Zappa specifies as ‘fake Broadway singing’ (‘Wistful Wit a Fist-Full’ *Thing-Fish*) in the *Thing-Fish* stage directions. Interestingly, in a perhaps refreshing change from using sex as his satirical weapon, in one section of *Thing-Fish* Zappa uses the taboo of horror as a weapon of provocation. Harry and Rhonda are confronted with ‘Broadway zombies’: a cavalcade of hideous undead musical icons – including a *Peter Pan* Zombie, a *Hello Dolly* Zombie, an *Oklahoma!* Zombie and an ‘UGLY UGLY O’PHAN ANNIE’ (‘Wistful Wit a Fist-Full’ *Thing-Fish*) Zombie plus obligatory zombie-dog – who re-enact their greatest stage moments. The *joie de vivre* of the eternally youthful Peter Pan and Annie and the hopeful idealism of their Broadway companions is provocatively transposed into a grotesque spectacle of the living dead.

By the end of the musical, Harry and Rhonda have been on a journey which the

latter concludes is ‘SYMBOLISM! Really deep, intense, thought-provoking Broadway SYMBOLISM’ (‘Won Ton On’ *Thing-Fish*). These are virtually the last lines of the musical and they are extremely playful. It is possible to read limitless symbolism into *Thing-Fish*, a work released the same month (November 1984) as Ronald Reagan secured a landslide return to the White House for a second term. The musical is a humorous yet damning indictment of the racism, religious fundamentalism, and selfish capitalism of 1980s America underpinned with conspiracy and the taboo. Numerous narrative moments, dramatic actions or narratorial or dialogic utterances in *Thing-Fish* can be seen as being loaded with symbolic meaning which has a profound satirical impact. Moreover, despite Harry and Rhonda’s disruptive and humiliating journey, they themselves conclude the play with self-reflective contemplation, analysing the rich symbolism of what they themselves have been subjected to.

Even more than *Joe’s Garage*, this 1984 work explores the process of amending and incorporating mainly existing compositions to adhere with what were originally unrelated scripts, essentially building a storyline around a pre-existing series of pieces. Long time Zappa sideman Ike Willis, who plays the eponymous character in *Thing-Fish*, reveals the developmental process that the project followed:

> We put everything together in song form first, and things were structured like that, but the thing was, it changed every day, because the script grew every day (Slaven 2003: 338).

Although both albums were criticised for using this practice, condemning Zappa for, as it were, self-plagiarism, it is important to acknowledge that this process is certainly not unique to Zappa. He is in fact continuing a long tradition that was initiated in the

developmental stages of musical theatre, the Ballad Opera regularly employing the technique of setting new lyrics to familiar melodies. To quote Richard Kislan:

> Like the Greek tragedies whose plot and background were known already to ancient audiences, the Ballad Opera capitalized on the effect of material long familiar to its audience (Kislan 1995: 13)[9].

More recently, we may wish to cite, once again, *Return to the Forbidden Planet* or *Crazy for You* (1991), the radical reworking of Gershwin's *Girl Crazy* (1930), and what was ironically publicised as the new Cole Porter musical *High Society* (1987). Like Zappa, in all of these cases the adapters were given freedom to examine their respective composers' back catalogues to find suitable material ('objects') for ongoing 'projects'.[10] However, author Mark Steyn believes that the Gershwin and Porter reworkings represent varying degrees of artistic merit (Steyn 2000: 16). Whereas the success of the music in *Crazy For You* was attributed to being 'true to Bobby's character and the engine of the drama' (Steyn 2000: 17), *High Society* director Richard Eyre's choice of 'How Do You Spell Ambassador' resulted in a destabilisation 'of the axis of the drama', leading to the song being 'actively misleading about all that follows' (Steyn 2000: 18). Zappa's demo recording of *Thing-Fish* clearly indicates that he was very aware of the 'destabilising' effects Steyn refers to, and was prepared to re-record sections that did not contribute to the work's progressive narrative.

The disparity of the piece 'Harry and Rhonda' on both recordings is indicative as to how radically Zappa was prepared to change his opinion regarding the desired impact of music on text. Originally opting for the organic timbres, eerie atmosphere and orchestral textures of 'Mo 'n Herbs Vacation, Second Movement', taken from *London Symphony Orchestra Vol 1* (1983), he eventually decided to utilise a sparse, computerised,

originally composed slow funk groove on the released version. This artistic decision not only changes the mood of the individual track, but by reducing the texture, melodic movement, and harmonic rhythm, he enables the listener to focus more intently on important narrative spoken by the work's principal characters Harry and Rhonda. Much of the music Zappa incorporated on both versions of *Thing-Fish* is either drawn from his early catalogue, or indeed incorporated in later recordings, and he skilfully plays with the context of the music and/or text, as well as maximising its position within the final work. For example 'Galoot Up-Date' uses the backing track of 'The Blue Light' (*Tinsel Town Rebellion* 1981), 'Mudd Club' is directly imported from *You Are What You Is* (1983), while the synclavier based 'That Evil Prince' was to eventually emerge in orchestral form as 'Amnerika' on Zappa's final recording *Civilization Phase III* (1995).

This practice is, in fact, not unusual throughout the history of musical theatre, Monteverdi establishing the paradigm by incorporating material from *L'Orfeo* in the 1610 *Vespers*, which was followed by notable examples such as Prokoviev's 3rd Symphony being a virtual instrumental version of his opera *Fiery Angel*. Neither was Zappa's practice unique in the context of popular music: indicative examples from the 1960s include Simon and Garfunkel's 'Save The Life Of My Child' (*Bookends* 1968), which 'samples' part of 'The Sound of Silence' (*The Sound of Silence* 1966), and Buffalo Springfield's live version of 'Broken Arrow' (*Retrospective: The Best of Buffalo Springfield* 1969), which incorporates a direct recording of their 'Mr Soul' (*Buffalo Springfield Again* 1967)[11]. 'Sampling' has, of course, become a pervasive practice in today's popular music industry, and it is important to recognise that Zappa represents an important conduit between *musique concrète* and modern day practices. The difference

between Zappa and his contemporaries is the regularity and almost scientific – yet theatrical – way he 'recontextualised' his life's work: to quote David Walley, Zappa was the 'ultimate cut and paste man' (Walley 1972: 8). Zappa himself describes the technique as 'conceptual continuity' and his entire portfolio brims with often-subliminal references to earlier works and he can be seen as revising or re-visioning himself in the creation of an ever-proliferating series of narratives. Zappa firmly believed that everything he composed was one small aspect of a wider philosophical context that he entitled 'The Big Note', a term he coins on *Lumpy Gravy* (1968). When asked how he regarded his portfolio in 1968 he commented:

> It's all one album. All the material in the album is organically related and if I had all the master tapes and I could take a razor blade and cut them apart and put it together again in a different order, it still would make one piece of music you can listen to (quoted in Slaven 2003: 121).

Zappa upheld this ideological perspective throughout his entire career, his portfolio not only referring to earlier works, but actually including the recorded 'object' in the new 'project'. Nevertheless, what is interesting here is that with *Joe's Garage* and *Thing-Fish* Zappa uses the same formal 'cut and paste' strategy but the result is two distinctive works of musical theatre with their own integrity.

Zappa asserted that 'no one has combined music and theatrics the way I have' (quoted in Slaven 2003: 199) and it is fair to argue that *Joe's Garage* and *Thing-Fish* are the most blatant examples of this and they are works which can be seen as remarkable examples of musical theatre. Frank Zappa remains an enigmatic and dichotomous figure and these tensions pervade his principal works of musical theatre as thoroughly as his many *leitmotifs*: he is an artist of deliberate contradictions and ambiguities. For every

song that celebrates anal or oral sex ('Keep It Greasy', 'Sy Borg', or 'Briefcase Boogie') there is a cautionary counterpoint with songs about AIDS or other sexually transmitted diseases ('The Torchum Never Stops' or 'Why Does It Hurt When I Pee?'). At other points Zappa is thoroughly mischievous: 'Fembot in a Wet T-Shirt' in *Joe's Garage* is a potentially highly offensive dramatisation of a wet t-shirt competition, especially in the moment when it shifts from titillation to violent humour ('Here comes the ice pick in the forehead!'). However, it is important to acknowledge that Zappa based this episode on a real life spectacle, one which he found 'so sickening that I didn't even stay to see the T-shirts get wet' (quoted in Courrier 2002: 334). As this example demonstrates, we should never underestimate Zappa's satirical and critical intentions. By the same token, a photo-narrative of *Thing-Fish* appeared in *Hustler* (April 1984) and functioned as a pastiche of the romantic photo-novel as well as being a simultaneously parodic and yet authentic example of pornographic narrative. This photo shoot stands in stark juxtaposition to the album cover which, as we saw earlier, boasts 'Original Cast Recording', although both photographs feature the same *Thing-Fish* costume and mask, the construction of which was funded by the *Hustler* owner Larry Flint.

Joe's Garage and *Thing-Fish* are both works which are visceral and sexual yet complex and thought-provoking; fragmented and absurd yet with a coherence and integrity to their satirical vision; their tone is scathing and yet both are profoundly impassioned; they are misanthropic and misogynistic and yet libertarian and radical – in his sexualised satire Zappa often seems to be in the tradition of the Earl of Rochester, Octave Mirbeau or Zappa's contemporary and compatriot Robert Crumb. These and other satirists like Zappa make the world 'ugly' in order to force us see the truth. 'Ugly' is

more than just an adjective for Zappa, it is a state of being and a critical weapon. As Delville and Norris claim, ‘ugliness becomes an ideological tool against both aesthetic and political kitsch’ (Delville and Norris 2005: 53). Aside from the content and detail of their carefully constructed narratives, *Joe’s Garage* and *Thing-Fish* are works that, in terms of style, continue to provoke and amuse through their constant collusion with, or disruption of, the conventions of both music *and* theatre, making both forms, like Zappa’s orphan Annie, severely *ugly*.

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[1] For example www.allmusic.com describes orchestral albums such as *The Yellow Shark* and *London Symphony Orchestra Volumes One and Two* as Rock.
[2] 'Village of the Sun' (*Roxy & Elsewhere* 1974) and 'Let's Make the Water Turn Black' (*We're Only In It For The Money* 1968).
[3] 'Stevie's Spanking' (*The Dub Room Special* 1981) or 'The Jazz Discharge Party Hats' (*The Man from Utopia* 1983).
[4] Adapted by Igor Stravinsky in 1951.
[5] A satire of L. Ron Hubbard (1911-86) and the Church of Scientology.
[6] Melodrama in its original Greek etymology *melos* (song) and *drama* (action).
[7] From the Greek words *xeno* (strange or alien) and *chrono* (time).
[8] This use of the term contrasts the appropriation of Lévi-Strauss's 'bricolage' in Feuer's analysis of the Hollywood musical (1992).
[9] This methodology can also be found in Pasticcio forms such as John Gay's *The Beggars Opera* (1728), a work which was, of course, adapted by Brecht and Weill into the aforementioned *Threepenny Opera*.
[10] This terminology was employed by Zappa to describe the perceived difference between the completed work of art in a recording (Object), and the ongoing process of redefining it (Project).
[11] We would like to thank the IASPM discussion forum for drawing our attention to these points.