

MUSI 246: American Musical Theatre History
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By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. —Dan Rubins

“That’s What It Is”:
Musical Potential and Stylistic Contrast in
Act One, Scene One of *The Most Happy Fella*

by Dan Rubins

Few musical theatre works boast as stylistically diverse a score as Frank Loesser’s *The Most Happy Fella*.¹ In telling this touching story of a middle-aged Italian grape farmer in the Napa Valley who courts a young waitress by letter, Loesser interweaves songs in the jazz-influenced, popular realm (the low art strand of musical theatre) with passionate, heightened high-art arias which draw more from the tradition of Italian opera than from English operetta. Musical moments as contrasting as the barber-shop quartet “Standin’ On The Corner” and the heart-wrenching “Mamma, Mamma” exist peaceably on the same stage and in the same world. Loesser gives the two musical styles essentially equal stage time, sometimes overlapping them within a scene, developing characters through the type of music they sing and their interplay with characters who sing in a contrasting style. The true greatness of *The Most Happy Fella*, which opened on Broadway in 1956, lies in the sense of a united world in which the quotidian and the transcendent can coexist and connect. In some moments, as in the final scene, Loesser’s obligation to reference the vernacular strand (in “I Made A Fist”) lets him down as the dramatic thrust demands an immediate operatic resolution, but, for the majority of the score, he

¹ The first scene of *The Most Happy Fella* is divided in the vocal score and libretto into three sections, “OVERTURE,” “OOH! MY FEET!,” and “SOMEBODY, SOMEWHERE.” “OOH! MY FEET!” contains most of the sung and spoken dialogue of the scene. In this paper, quotes from the vocal score and libretto will be cited using O, OMF, or SS to signify the section of the opening scene, followed by a measure number and page number. Unless otherwise indicated, all citations reference: Loesser, Frank. *The Most Happy Fella*, Vocal Score and Libretto. New York: Frank Music Corp., 1956. Print.

comfortably moves between the two musical spheres. Nowhere is this achieved more successfully or compactly than in the opening diner scene of the musical, essentially a dialogue between the romantic and comic leading ladies, Rosabella and Cleo, bookended by Cleo's humorous character song, "Ooh! My Feet!" and Rosabella's soaring ballad, "Somebody, Somewhere."

On the surface, Rosabella and Cleo are presented as a matching pair. They live together and work together as diner waitresses, they are both traditional young American women (Rosabella from "somewhere in the northern part of the U. S." [OMF, p. 15] and Cleo from Dallas), and they have presumably each "helped a few fellows prove they were fellows" (OMF, m. 70, p.16). They understand each other's day-to-day struggles (Cleo's repeated "I know how it is") because they share them; Rosabella is even introduced - in the midst of her skirmish with her leering boss - with an orchestral version of "Ooh! My Feet!," (OMF, mm. 50-60, p. 15), the motif of Cleo's daily struggle, further aligning the two women.

Within this basic structure, though, the two women deviate in their self-view. Cleo lives entirely in the moment; her hopes and dreams are grounded by her immediate needs and she never, in the opening scene, suggests any desire for something outside of the world of the diner. "Ooh! My Feet!" is a purely situational song, an immediate reaction to the problem that Cleo holds uppermost in her mind at the show's opening: her feet hurt. Rosabella, on the other hand, is "going home every night, kinda wanting something," (OMF, m. 149, p. 24), and her opening song, "Somebody, Somewhere" deals with the hope of an abstract future (even though it is in present tense). Rosabella, whose real name is Amy, has a fervent desire and *need* to define her identity; when Tony's letter dubs her "Rosabella," she responds, "I guess that's me!" (OMF, m. 101, p. 19) and, instantly, without further discussion, she *is* Rosabella for the rest of the show.

This contrast between Cleo and Rosabella is exemplified when Rosabella wonders what the mysterious thing that they want could be, and Cleo responds, “wanting to soak my feet,” (OMF, m. 151, p. 24), unwilling to confront any kind of spiritual emptiness in herself.

This distinction is musically emphasized in the vocal writing. Cleo’s sarcastic description of the possibility for excitement in a waitress’ life (“Seven million crumbs” etc.) is sung entirely through half-steps, oscillating from E to D# to D (OMF, mm. 84-93, p. 18). Cleo, figuratively and literally, has an extremely limited range of the variations in her day-to-day life; she leads, at this point, a riskless, chromatic existence. In the “Maybe he’s kind-a crazy” section of the scene, the first time we hear Rosabella sing in her own voice (as opposed to reading from the letter), her melody is repeated in part by Cleo. Rosabella’s phrase, “I’m gonna send him his postcard saying: ‘Thank you, yours sincerely’” is immediately transposed down a fourth for Cleo’s “could be some kind of Rasputin/Or a small town Jack the Ripper” which, through shared motifs, links the two women further (OMF, mm. 136-144, p. 23). Rosabella, however, approaches this phrase with a leap of a perfect fourth (from E to A), while Cleo descends a half step (F to E). Rosabella is taking a larger risk, broadening her world, in her decision to send Tony the postcard.

In their opening scene conversation, Cleo and Rosabella are running on parallel tracks, both aware of what the other is saying but not fully invested in it. Cleo, especially, although she clearly cares genuinely about Rosabella, is limited by her focus on the immediate moment. Loesser highlights this musically by slightly anticipating Cleo’s vocal entrances for her three “I know how it is” verses, each vocal “I” beginning on the final sixteenth note or eighth note of a measure (the end of 4) and tied to an eighth note in the following measure, the true beginning of the phrase (OMF, mm. 61, 69, 77, pp. 15-17). This almost indistinguishable offsetting of the downbeat creates a natural sense of interruption; in each instance, Cleo is either ignoring or

actually interrupting Rosabella. They each have their own interpretation of the literal rhythm and meter of the scene, strengthening the impression that they are having separate but simultaneous, and occasionally overlapping, experiences throughout the scene. Cleo cuts in with the phrase, “I know how it is,” but, without fully listening to Rosabella’s words, she is not allowing for the possibility of discovering something she does *not* fully grasp. The separation of Cleo’s pragmatism and Rosabella’s dreaminess is somewhat overemphasized by Cleo’s lengthy monologue about the “fuzzy gray stuff...in the bottom of your pocket” (OMF, p. 22) during Rosabella’s emotional reaction to Tony’s letter. This split is more subtly demonstrated, though, by an unevenness in speech and song through most of the scene: in the “I Know How It Is” sequence, Rosabella speaks while Cleo sings, and the roles reverse for the letter reading. Even though they share common experiences, they speak very different *musical languages* and have divergent conditions under which they will turn speech into song. Rosabella *never* sings about what is happening in the moment or about ordinary, daily occurrences whereas Cleo almost exclusively does. It is as if Rosabella is waiting for the right moment and for the emotional impact that will merit singing; once she decides to write back to Tony, however, her opportunities to sing begin to rapidly grow.

While Rosabella and Cleo share the same vernacular language in song, the most significant difference between them lies in the contrast of their musical expression. Cleo’s music is representative of the pop-influenced musical theatre sound (see “Ooh! My Feet!,” “Big D,” “I Don’t Like This Dame,” “I Like Ev’rybody”), while Rosabella’s music usually tends towards the operatic (“Somebody, Somewhere,” “Warm All Over,” “Like A Woman Loves A Man,” “Please Let Me Tell You,” and the throbblingly powerful “My Heart is So Full of You”). The passionate, almost majestic, music that Rosabella is given in the first scene appears at odds with the

vernacular language that she uses. Except for the questionable word “aglow,” the diction of “Somebody, Somewhere” is what would be expected from any diner waitress. In place of the more formal “For” that might be expected, based on the heightened music, to connect “And I’ll admit I’m all aglow” with “Somebody, somewhere” and the penultimate A section, Rosabella sings, “‘Cause,” (SS, m. 24, p. 26) and, elsewhere in the scene, she sings the informal “kind-a” and “gonna” (OMF, mm. 131-138, p. 23). Each of these moments serve as a reminder that when Rosabella sings, it is an extension of her speaking self.

Yet, there is an unquestionable passion and transcendent quality in Rosabella’s music that seems contrary to the vernacular language and the simplicity of thought in the first scene, particularly in “Somebody, Somewhere.” This can be expressed in terms of a *musical potential*, imposed by an external omniscient orchestrator of sorts who is aware, unlike Rosabella, that she is both capable of enormous emotional growth and maturity, and that she *will* eventually reach that potential. In the moment of “Somebody, Somewhere,” nothing much has happened to Rosabella – she certainly has not *done* anything herself – to earn a marking of “Molto espressivo e con calore,” (SS, m. 153, p. 24) even if the realization of her “wanting to be wanted” comes as a real epiphany to her. Nowhere in Rosabella’s life at the diner has there been any evidence of an existence deserving of soaring melodies and pulsing strings; the music expresses something that Rosabella has never actually *experienced* but that she clearly has the *potential* to experience. The agency within the song, then, comes not from Rosabella but from this omniscient orchestrator presence.

To fully understand the orchestral musical potential in “Somebody, Somewhere,” it is helpful to examine “Ooh! My Feet!,” which lacks a strong sense of this musical potential. Instead, the score and orchestration serve to reinforce Cleo’s narrow focus on the quotidian and

the immediate. The song's basic, conventional AABA structure (with an expanded B section and coda) confines Cleo to a fairly rigid, repetitive existence. The tempo marking of "Pesante," along with a consistent tenuto cello/bass quarter note march throughout most of the song does not take the listener outside of Cleo's world. The orchestration very much depicts Cleo's diner life: the repetitive march feel matches her constant walking and the heaviness suggests her aching feet. The twisting chromaticisms in the melody from m. 20 to m. 27 (OMF, p. 12) reflect the images of her toes being bent out of shape as she describes them. Even when the crashing march lightens to a lilting descending bass line and turns *pianissimo* (OMF, m. 28, p. 13), after only four measures a long low chord calls Cleo back to work and the marching immediately resumes; she cannot escape the endless diner plodding and the music offers her nothing else. This is not to say that the music dooms Cleo to the diner, but it clearly defines her as a character who emotionally confines herself to the present moment.

"Somebody, Somewhere," on the other hand, is a musicalization of the future: what happens in the orchestration is *not* in any way a representation of what is happening in Rosabella's reality. The brief verse to the song consists of Rosabella identifying her unspecified want for something as, "Wanting to be wanted/Needing to be needed," confirming this with the twice-sung, "That's what it is." Each "that's what it is" comes halfway through the first beat, as if a chordal moment of epiphany occurs on each downbeat, and the vocal line soars above anything she has previously sung to correlate with her sudden self-knowledge; a harp glissando connects the first downbeat with the second, so the full realization sinks in after the full two measures (OMF, mm. 158-159, p. 25). Once the chorus begins, there is not a single rest in the entire vocal line, steadying Rosabella's melody on the downbeat and suggesting that the idea of the song comes to Rosabella fully formed. The song begins and ends with the same lyric,

“Somebody, somewhere/Wants me and needs me/That’s very wonderful to know,” (with the addition of an “and” before the final phrase in the song’s last line) so, through the song, Rosabella confirms her original conclusion, rather than reaching a new one. The 40-bar structure consists of five 8-bar phrases each of which are melodically closely related and each of which lyrically convey some variation of the meaning of the opening phrase.

The audience learns more about Rosabella, then, not from her lyrics, but from the orchestration which, through countermelody and tempo acceleration, adds the aforementioned crucial dimension of *potential* and expresses the feeling of “wonderful” knowledge more precisely than Rosabella can. In the first measures of the song, the clarinet doubles Rosabella’s melody in measures 1 and 3, and, while Rosabella sustains a whole note in measures 2 and 4, the English horn responds to the ascending clarinet line with a descending countermelody. A *real* romance with this unknown “somebody” is present in this orchestral duet; the English horn provides the response that Rosabella so desperately wants to hear (SS, mm. 1-4, p. 25). While Rosabella’s vocal lines remain at a steady tempo, as she holds out the final note of each phrase, the orchestra accelerates beneath her, pushing her into the next phrase where the initial tempo resumes (SS, mm. 7, 23, 31, pp. 25-27). It is as if the orchestra is nudging her forward to follow her impulse to find this “someone,” even though she seems content, for now, to return to the steadily-paced comfort of knowing that such a possibility exists. Finally, in the closing phrase of the song, Rosabella captures some of her transcendent musical potential in her vocal line, soaring to a high G, before coming down to rest an octave lower. While Rosabella returns from that peak, descending and settling simply in her middle range, the orchestra continues to swell until the final measure (SS, mm. 9-11, p. 27). In all these examples, Rosabella is not yet ready to

commit to a spiritual quest for the fulfillment she seeks, but, the orchestration insists, even though she is unaware of it, she *will* reach that potential.

Loesser uses Cleo and her vernacular sound in the opening scene to ensure that the audience, less attuned to connecting with operatic moments and characters, will accept Rosabella and her musical world. From the beginning of “Ooh! My Feet,” the audience recognizes their own quotidian grumblings in Cleo and feels comfortable with the familiar conventions in the composition of her song. Cleo also reflects our doubt about the likelihood of Rosabella’s reaction to the discovery of the letter, responding with her own skepticism (“To start with,/He’s a lunatic of a tipper”); we can suspend our disbelief at Rosabella’s story because Cleo, inside the story, shares it. Since Cleo is made equivalent to Rosabella in so many ways, including her vernacular use of language, and since Cleo clearly trusts and cares about Rosabella, we can extend our connection with Cleo to a connection with Rosabella. Finally, having accepted Rosabella’s language and character, we are led along to embrace her music as well. Cleo, then, is the audience’s way in to the heightened music that Rosabella introduces and that Tony and Rosabella will sustain.

Indeed, although only Rosabella and Cleo appear onstage, Tony, in both his words and melodies, is an equal force in the scene. Rosabella has not really changed as a person from the beginning to the end of the scene; she has, though, thanks to Tony’s letter, been supplied with an understanding of what it is she wants. With Tony’s letter as the catalyst for her ballad, rather than Rosabella expressing her desires without a plot-related impetus, the song is given a dramatic forward thrust, linking Rosabella’s identity and desires with Tony, the mysterious foreigner who wants to marry her. In the diner scene, Rosabella sings the words of his letter with the same melody that he will later repeat, in excerpt to Marie in the following scene and in its complete

form in the final scene. Indeed, the overture, which leads through a direct segue into the diner underscoring, is comprised entirely of music associated with Tony: the “Most Happy Fella” theme, quotes from “Mamma, Mamma,” and, ultimately, a Maestoso declaration of the entire letter theme which plays a central role in the opening diner scene (O, pp. 7-9). Tony’s “I want to get marry” motif occurs six times in the overture alone in three different keys; it will appear three more times in three different keys, vocally and orchestrally, in Act One, Scene One. By having the musical themes most closely linked to Tony feature heavily throughout the diner scene, his role as the instigator of the action (by leaving the letter and jewelry) is emphasized and his immediate connection with Rosabella is strengthened.

Tony’s world is always only a few beats away from the world of the diner. The grandiose conclusion of the overture segues directly into the diner theme without pause (O, mm. 85-86, pp. 9-10) and the mystical rolled chord on the harp before, “My dear Rosabella” (Tony’s world) is easily canceled out by the jazzy $C_{13}b5$ chord which snaps the audience back into the world of the diner (OMF, mm. 100-101, p. 19). Rosabella, then, is allowed to, for now, exist in both worlds at once.

Rosabella’s knowledge of Tony’s melody and her fluent reading of Tony’s broken English demonstrate the as-if-predestined nature of their link. Were Rosabella not fated to be paired with Tony, it would be surprising for her to correctly sing his melodic interpretation of his letter since an understanding of, literally, the music in someone’s mind conveys a deep connection. By having Rosabella sing the words of Tony’s letter before Tony does, Loesser heightens the dramatic tension of their relationship; when Tony sings the letter with the very same melody in the next scene, the audience realizes that Rosabella and Tony are fated for each other, long before the couple is assured of it. Cleo, on the other hand, is unable to capture Tony’s

musical language; when she reads from the letter, it is either *spoken*, not sung, or the tempo is distorted (OMF, m. 128, p. 21). Cleo also translates Tony's broken English as she reads, unlike Rosabella who precisely speaks his language.

In the first scene, however, Rosabella and Tony are not yet aligned in their conception of love. Tony is not interested in getting married for its own sake; he wants to marry *Rosabella*, since he is convinced of some sort of instinctive, personal tie between them. In "Somebody, Somewhere," as evidenced by its title line alone, Rosabella falls in love with the idea of being wanted by *someone*, and this someone's identity does not much matter to her. She identifies what she wants in terms of herself, wanting someone to need or want *her*; she does *not* value as highly her capacity to return this love. It is this non-specificity of love that allows Rosabella to sleep with Joe, the foreman, at the end of the first act; he *wants* her, she needs to be needed in a moment of despair, and that is enough. Since Rosabella's infidelity with Joe is clearly established as the *wrong* way to understand love, Tony's personal, unambiguous love for Rosabella must be, in the world of *The Most Happy Fella*, the correct way to find fulfillment. Rosabella finally learns to reciprocate in the glorious "My Heart is So Full of You," so fully in love with Tony as an individual that there is "no room in [her] heart for anything more" ("My Heart is So Full of You," mm. 38-43, p. 204-5). Her ability to fill her heart in "My Heart is So Full of You" is the achievement of the musical potential established in the opening scene in "Somebody, Somewhere": only with Tony, and by way of her love for him, can the sentiment of Rosabella's words match her operatic, soaring music. The orchestral duet in the opening lines of "Somebody, Somewhere" finds its way into reality when Rosabella's voice joins with Tony, as she chooses the operatic world over the vernacular, in the way the omniscient orchestrator of the opening scene promised.

In his *New York Times* review of the original Broadway production, Brooks Atkinson wrote that, “Broadway is used to heart,” but “it is not accustomed to evocations of the soul.”² Loesser’s great triumph in *The Most Happy Fella* is the balance of heart and soul, accommodating, in the opening scene, both the endearing authenticity of Cleo and the transcendent potential of Rosabella.

² Atkinson, Brooks. “Loessers’ Fine Music Drama - ‘The Most Happy Fella’ Opens at Imperial.” *New York Times* May 4, 1956. Print.