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«WHEN I COME AROUND AGAIN»: TIME, DREAM AND MEMORY IN THE MUSICALS OF ALAN JAY LERNER

ABSTRACT. *The American lyricist Alan Jay Lerner is best known for writing the book and lyrics for* My Fair Lady *(1956), an adaptation of Shaw's* Pygmalion *(1913), but his output as a whole reveals an interest in memory, dreams and time, key anxieties of American society in the mid-twentieth century. This article examines Lerner's comments on his identity as a writer to help understand how he viewed himself as regards lyric writing and poetry. The article then surveys examples from most of his musicals to consider how these three interrelated themes lie at the heart of his work regardless of the setting or plot of his musicals. It analyses how in musicals like* Love Life *(1948) and* 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue *(1976) the reference to dreams serves a wider critique of the American Dream, while a focus on time can underpin the needs of hours passing (as in "The Servants' Chorus" from* My Fair Lady*) or the use of seasons to represent the passage of time from birth to death (as in* Camelot*, 1960). The article also offers a consideration of Lerner's most metaphysical work* On a Clear Day You Can See Forever *(1965), in which reincarnation and extra-sensory perception collide.*

When reflecting on the role and nature of the lyricist in popular culture, and the bleeding of their status into poetry, the American writer Alan Jay Lerner is a particularly interesting and useful case study. In his view, song lyrics were decidedly *not* poetry, because they could not stand alone without the music that was written to be heard at the same time. In his autobiography *The Street Where I Live*, Lerner begins by almost apologising to the reader for including lyrics in his book, stating that «Lyrics, no less than music, are written to be heard. A lyric without its musical clothes is a scrawny creature and should never be allowed to parade naked across the printed page. Nevertheless, for purposes of reference, that is precisely what I am heartlessly allowing mine to do... Should the reader be interested in reading any of the lyrics discussed in the following pages, he will find them shivering *in toto* at the end of the book».[1] The word

[1] A.J. LERNER, *The Street Where I Live*, "Author's Note", New York, Norton, p. 6.

"shivering" indicates viscerally the feeling of lyrics divorced from music – bare, and therefore cold on the page without its musical "clothing". Contrast this with the description of poetry by the great American Poet Laureate (1993-95) Rita Dove, who stated that «Poetry is language at its most distilled and most powerful».[2] While Dove's view is not universal, it's certainly the case that on the one hand, Lerner saw his lyrics as 50% of a whole, rather than a complete picture, and on the other hand, many poets see the intense focus of poetry on language as the source of its special expressive charge, therefore making the distinction between poetry and lyrics.

Furthermore, Lerner mainly saw himself as a "librettist", describing how

> whenever I fill out a form which asks that I identify my profession I do not say I am a librettist. I say 'playwright-lyricist'. Until a few years ago it was not even proper to say 'lyricist' because there was no such word in the dictionary. A man who wrote words for a song was officially called a lyrist. Popular usage finally defeated tradition and lyricist became accepted. Amen.[3]

For Lerner, the word "librettist" is the most accurate description of his profession because he contextualises his work in American musicals against the longer-established genre of opera, but the term "playwright-lyricist" equally expresses a tension between the two roles he plays: the person who writes the dialogue, and the person who writes the words that are sung. Later in the book, he clarifies his thoughts on this. He writes: «One of the reasons I dislike the word librettist is best illustrated by a famous Mrs. Malaprop of New York who years ago, when asked where she had been the night before, said: 'To the opera'. Asked what she had seen, she replied: 'It was some Italian opera called *Libretto*». Later, he continues, «A librettist has always seemed to me someone associated with opera and operetta and who specialised in unintelligibility and anonymity. Nevertheless, that is what I am. A librettist». Thus, we might call Lerner a reluctant librettist, but it is clear he would not recognise himself as a poet.

To make things more complicated, Lerner's original ambition was to write both words and music for his songs, following the model of Irving Berlin and Cole Porter. (Perhaps this is the source of his view that lyrics are bare without the music.) Between 1937 and 1939, he wrote and performed in contributions to two Hasty Pudding shows, *So Proudly We Hail* (1938) and *Fair Enough* (1939). These were student musicals, written and performed at Harvard University with one performance at the Waldorf Astoria in New York. While hardly

[2] D. Streitfeld, *Laureate for a New Age*, «Washington Post», May 19, 1993, p. 19.
[3] A.J. Lerner, *The Street*, cit., p. 23.

distinguished, some of these songs were professionally published by no less than Chappell and gave Lerner the chance to think about what Stephen Banfield terms "melopoetics" – in other words, songwriting.[4]

From my perspective, these early songs also indicate three interconnected topics that are used prevalently in one or more songs from all Lerner's professional musicals: time, dreams, and memory. In using these themes, he took his work into the realm of the poetical, notwithstanding his comments about being a librettist. For example, in the song "Chance to Dream" (*So Proudly We Hail*, 1938), the verse contains the line «I find my thrill in dreams, / That's when I'm happy, it seems»,[5] and in the refrain the character goes on to use references to time to explain why he is happier being displaced from the here and now, preferring instead to dream. The first stanza ends, «Oh, that's my chance to dream», while the last concludes with «I'll throw my head back and say that I'm / So lucky with my chance to dream». Written on the brink of the Second World War, the song toys with the possibility that living in another plane of consciousness is more desirable than confronting the here and now.

In another song from this period for which Lerner provided both words and music, "Then I'll Forget You" (1937), the lyricist uses the image of "forgetting" as the hook for a song text about how the character singing the song could not possibly forget the woman he loves: «When April show'rs have failed to bring flow'rs / And winds don't blow as they do, / The day my heart stops its beating, / I'll forget you».[6] And in "Home Made Heaven" from *Fair Enough* (1939), which begins with dream imagery, the character Ned sings, «Didn't you ever dream you owned a palace? / Or were an Alice in Wonderland? / [...] Times have changed and dreams are not what they used to be».[7] In this, Lerner evokes the "cozy little cottage" trope of many songs of the interwar period, noted by Jeffrey Magee, whereby lovers imagine themselves living together in domestic harmony.[8]

These ideas – and, in particular, their execution – are neither original nor stellar, but they reveal themes that were at the heart of Lerner's creative toolkit from his first attempts at songwriting as a teenager, and which became more significant as his career went on. He was interested in the metaphysical, the nature of reality, the

[4] S. Banfield, *Sondheim and the Art That Has No Name*, in Robert Lawson-Peebles (ed.), *Approaches to the American Musical*, Exeter, University of Exeter Press, pp. 137-160.
[5] D. McHugh, A. Asch (eds.), *The Complete Lyrics of Alan Jay Lerner*, New York, Oxford University Press, p. 3.
[6] D. McHugh, A. Asch, *Lyrics*, cit., p. 6.
[7] D. McHugh, A. Asch, *Lyrics*, cit., pp. 4-5.
[8] J. Magee, *From Flatbush to* Fun Home, in Tara Browner and Thomas L. Riis (eds.), *Rethinking American Music*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2019, pp. 34-49.

things we can't explain, and regardless of the subject of the musical he was writing, these topics come into all his work, from first to last. Lerner discussed how this interest derived from his school days, when he read a newspaper announcement of a lecture being given by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle to the British Psychic Society on the nature and existence of God. He was excited but

> When the great day came, I picked up the newspaper and read to my dismay that that week Sir Arthur Conan Doyle had died [...]. Nevertheless, I wrote to the British Psychic Society, asking if anyone had a copy of the speech Sir Arthur had intended to deliver [...]. From then on I began to receive literature from the Society [...] now and then, I would understand a sentence or two – enough, at least to make me realise that all the answers were not in.

He concludes:

> Ever since that day in the library of the Bedales School in Petersfield, Hampshire, until this very moment, nothing, outside of the theatre, has intrigued me and sustained my unflagging interest more than the occult, extrasensory perception, reincarnation and all that is called metaphysical.[9]

Lerner and Loewe's first Broadway musical, *What's Up?* (1943), uses the "time" and "memory" tropes in a couple of its songs: "How Fly Times" contains puns on the perception of time moving slowly during a quarantine («Tempus / Is hurrying past us. / Old tempus is fugiting fast»), and the poignant ballad "My Last Love" uses memory of a former lover to highlight the intensity of a new romantic interest («My last love didn't touch my heart this way»). More significantly, multiple aspects of Lerner and Loewe's second Broadway musical, *The Day Before Spring* (1945), reflect Lerner's interest in the metaphysical. Unusually for that period, the musical was not an adaptation of an existing source but rather an original for which Lerner invented the plot from scratch: therefore, we can take the show as an indication of his focus as a 27-year-old writer. The plot deals with the marriage of Katherine and Peter Townsend, who met at university. Ten years before the show starts, Katherine had been attracted to another classmate, Alex, and tried to run off and have a love affair with him while they were students. Their car broke down, and they were rescued by Peter, who presented as a more sensible alternative. In the intervening years, Katherine and Peter have been married, but Alex has written a novel about his relationship with Katherine, which she is seen reading at the opening of the musical as the curtain goes up.

[9] A.J. Lerner, *The Street Where I Live*, p. 21.

The title of the novel is *The Day Before Spring*, hence the title of the musical, and Katherine is so intrigued that she decides to attend their ten-year college reunion, where she bumps into Alex and is immediately attracted to him again. Lerner heightens this moment by immediately having them burst into song – a number called "You Haven't Changed at All", which emphasises the role of the passage of time in generating intense memories, resulting in their simmering passion for each other. «Though it's been a while / You're as I recall», Alex sings, while Katherine responds: «Ev'ry word you say / I can well recall».[10] The song gives the impression of time, once suspended, now restarted by the reunion of the former lovers. Whether their memories are accurate or not is irrelevant: the potency of memory as a topic acts to symbolise their continued attraction.

Over the course of the first act, Katherine interacts with Alex and is tempted to run away with him, as she did ten years ago. To resolve her indecision, she consults the statues of the philosophers Voltaire, Plato and Freud that stand in the University library, in a number called "Katherine Receives Advice", obviously influenced by the title of Agnes de Mille's dream ballet from Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!*, "Laurey Makes Up Her Mind", though Lerner and Loewe's equivalent is told in song rather than dance. Lerner outlines Katherine's three options: Plato advises her to stay with her husband («For perfect love is not cyclonic, / It should be calm and just platonic»); Voltaire advises her to take a lover but retain her marriage («Katherine, don't act like a silly child of seventeen, / Katherine, keep your lover but be sure he's never seen. / And whatever else you do, / Hold on to your husband too»); and Freud says she should follow her impulse and run away («Run away, run away, / Yes, fast as you can. / Run away, run away, / Yes, flee with your man»), which is what she wants to hear and the advice she decides to take.[11]

The real-life Freud had travelled to America and lectured there on psychoanalysis in 1909, but it was only during the Second World War that psychiatry really took hold. According to Charles Barber, recruits to the armed forces were screened for their mental fitness and over a million men were rejected. A further million were admitted to hospital during the war due to «guilt, anxiety and flashbacks».[12] Thus, Lerner's projection of dreams, fantasy and the psyche into *The Day Before Spring* is highly situated in its social moment in the USA. *The Day Before Spring* ran only three months, but Lerner followed

[10] D. McHugh, A. Asch, *Lyrics*, cit., p. 32-33.
[11] D. McHugh, A. Asch, *Lyrics*, cit., p. 36-39.
[12] C. Barber, *How Freud Conquered America, Then Lost It*, «The Wilson Quarterly», Winter 2008 [https://www.wilsonquarterly.com/quarterly/winter-2008-the-coming-revolution-in-africa/how-freud-conquered-america-then-lost-it-3]. Accessed 1 July 2025.

it up with an all-out hit, *Brigadoon*, that took these themes further. From the opening number, the show is immediately framed as a fable, blurring memory with myth: «Once in the Highlands, the Highlands of Scotland / [...] Two weary hunters lost their way». This sets up the whole work as operating in a poetical rather than real space. The musical was the ultimate expression of how people felt emerging from War: the character Tommy wakes up and does not recognise the world around him because it has changed so much. In the following dialogue from the opening scene, Tommy represents Lerner's point of view, while his cynical friend Jeff is happy to ignore unexplainable questions. Jeff and Tommy are Americans on holiday in the Scottish Highlands:

> Tommy: Now where the hell are we?
> Jeff: What's in the middle?
> Tommy: Nothing.
> Jeff: That's where we are.
> Tommy: In nothing?
> Jeff: Sure.

Later in the conversation, Tommy says, «You don't believe in anything, do you?», and Jeff responds, «Of course I do. Practically anything I can understand, you know, anything that's real to me. Like things I can touch, taste, hear, see, smell and – swallow». He says he dismisses the things he doesn't understand, and Tommy responds: «That makes everything very easy, doesn't it?».[13]

Establishing this theme of believing in things we can't physically detect in the non-sung passages of the musical enables Lerner to make it a theme of several of the song lyrics. For example, in her first number "Waitin' for My Dearie", Fiona delivers the conventional "I want" song, singing «I hold a dream an' there's no compromisin'» to show her belief in the romantic fairytale of the "one true love".[14] This is strongly contrasted with Meg's equivalent number "The Love of My Life", in which finding a lover is a more earthbound, practical matter.[15] Later, in the verse of "There But For You Go I", Tommy talks about the clarity of dreams, of how wandering the lea with his eyes open gave him a feeling that he didn't understand, but when he closed his eyes, he found the answers he sought («Then I closed my eyes and saw / The very reason why»). This then sets up the content of the refrain, in which Tommy imagines a series of images of other people who are in a less fortunate position than himself («I saw a man with his head bowed low. / His

[13] A.J. Lerner, *Brigadoon*, New York, Coward-McCann, 1947, pp. 6-7.
[14] D. McHugh, A. Asch, *Lyrics*, cit., p. 57.
[15] D. McHugh, A. Asch, *Lyrics*, cit., pp. 60-61.

heart had no place to go» and so on).[16] And in the final number, "From This Day On", Fiona declares that even if she and Tommy are now to be parted, «Someday if I should love / It's you I'll be dreaming of», a couplet that Lerner changed so that the idea of "dreaming" would be added (it originally read, innocuously, «Your hand so warm in mine; / Your laugh soft as summer wine»).[17]

Curiously, in his next musical, *Love Life*, Lerner's main character, Sam, adopts the opposite approach to Tommy's in *Brigadoon*: he cherishes what he sees in front of him. *Love Life* itself describes a couple's marriage over the course of 130 years, with each scene progressing to a new era of American history. Sam and Susan do not age, but their marriage is shown to fall apart as industrialisation takes over and breaks up American society (and particularly the idea of family). Thus, in its purest and happiest form, Sam and Susan's marriage is expressed in the song "Here I'll Stay" in the opening scene of the show, actually rejecting the idea that the images outlined by poets represent the ultimate aspiration of heaven. «Susan, this is all I'm searching for [...] / There is no other world awaiting me; / That meadow is as far as I can see». Instead, he says, «my heaven is no higher than a tree». This idea is developed through the refrain through a series of oppositions: the first stanza states, «There's a far land, I'm told, / Where I'll find a field of gold; / But here I'll stay with you».[18]

This fondness is extended in the song "I Remember It Well", where Lerner's role as a playwright underpins the song lyric so that Sam and Susan can discuss their alternating memories of their courtship:

> Sam: It was late at night.
> Susan: It was six fifteen.
> Sam: You were dressed in white.
> Susan: I was all in green.
> Sam: That's right! I remember it well.[19]

Susan's corrections of Sam's faulty memories help to portray the couple's relationship as poignant and endearing, but ten years later, Lerner recycled the song title and the dialogue structure of the song to use variant memories to a different effect in the MGM film musical *Gigi* (1958):

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[16] D. McHugh, A. Asch, *Lyrics*, cit., p. 65.
[17] D. McHugh, A. Asch, *Lyrics*, cit., p. 67.
[18] D. McHugh, A. Asch, *Lyrics*, cit., pp. 78-79.
[19] D. McHugh, A. Asch, *Lyrics*, cit., pp. 81-83.

Honoré: We met at nine.
Mamita: We met at eight.
Honoré: I was on time.
Honoré: Ah yes! I remember it well.[20]

Clearly, Hermione Gingold's Mamita remembers Maurice Chevalier's Honoré very deeply and admits that she was in love with him; his lines in the song essentially reveal that he hardly remembers her at all, a poignant gap in their positions.

Throughout *Love Life*, Lerner further emphasises time and memory to illustrate his critical view of American industrialisation. The use of a vaudeville format, with social commentary in satirical numbers between each scene – foreshadowing a better-known example of the device in Styne, Sondheim and Laurents's *Gypsy* (1959) – allows Lerner to jump forwards in time to a new point in American history. Social decay occurs as the nineteenth century progresses, and Lerner and Weill's songs such as "Economics" and "Madrigal" allow them to combine entertainment with startling messages. The song "Susan's Dream", cut from the show before it opened on Broadway, takes this even further, with a quartet of singers describing how Susan dreamed «Of the way life should be», expressing her longing to be free of Sam's alcohol habit and her children's demands on her energy; but at the end, she «Woke up and with a sob she started smilin'» because «Susan dreamed exactly what she had». In other words, Lerner identifies the ironic problem of living with the American Dream when one has achieved it. Is it better to journey than to arrive?

Lerner's period at MGM also features a heavy emphasis on the three themes explored in this article. His first original MGM film, *Royal Wedding* (1951), uses time to express the King's impatience in the metatheatrical opening number "Every Night at Seven": «The passing hours are an endless year / Until at last I'm alone with you».[21] Although the film as a whole is undistinguished, another metatheatrical number, "Open Your Eyes", features one of Lerner's most metaphysical images: «So open your eyes / And you'll see how this momentary / Ordinary night can seem / More unreal than a dream».[22] Here, Lerner suggests that real life can be stranger than dreams, something he would return to more drastically in his later work; Hollywood's moniker "The Dream Factory" is the perfect term to understand how the movies were an ideal setting for Lerner's romantic instinct. Although he did not write the lyrics, Lerner's screenplay for

[20] D. McHugh, A. Asch, *Lyrics*, cit., pp. 263-264.
[21] D. McHugh, A. Asch, *Lyrics*, cit., p. 131.
[22] D. McHugh, A. Asch, *Lyrics*, cit., p 132.

An American in Paris (1951) gave rise to one of the screen's great fantastical numbers, the concluding dream ballet, using George Gershwin's iconic music: it was an extension of ideas he had been developing for over a decade in his stage work. As for Lerner's most successful movie, *Gigi*, the multigenerational nature of the story – which focuses more on relationships between characters of different ages than on action per se – reaches its locus classicus in Honoré's "I'm Glad I'm Not Young Any More",[23] which provides unusual exuberance in the idea of being able to use memory to embrace old age rather than fear it: «The fountain of youth is dull as paint», Lerner writes with a poet's insight.

The gap between hopes and reality was a key theme of the postwar American theatre, including in non-musical plays. Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Miller's *Death of a Salesman* were just two of the various works of the late 1940s that searingly portrayed the fragility of the American Dream, and in 1951 Lerner provided his own, musical comedy take on it, *Paint Your Wagon*. This work addresses the nineteenth-century gold rush, when miners would adventure westwards with the intention of stripping the land of its natural riches. *Paint Your Wagon* satirises the blind faith of the miners by portraying their naivety in the opening number, "I'm on My Way". The song's bridge latches onto the folly of the American Dream («Where'm I goin', I don't know. / Where'm I headin', I ain't certain. / All I know is I am on my way!»), before the return of the opening phrase declares: «But who gives a damn / I'm on my way».[24] As the plot of *Paint Your Wagon* progresses, the miners start to desert the land to move on to a site with more potential. The settlement becomes lonelier, and in Julio's song "Another Autumn" Lerner uses what James Naremore (invoking Roland Barthes) calls the semiotics of "season-ness" [25] to express the falling apart of the miners' dreams: «For you can dream in *spring* / When ev'ry hope is high [...] / But when the *fall* comes in / They all fade [...] / You'll be alone / All *winter* long».[26]

This descent from spring to winter as "birth to death" returns later in Lerner's work in a more famous show, *Camelot*, in 1960. As is well known, the youthful optimism of the opening of the first act of *Camelot*, in which King Arthur woos Guenevere with his idealistic vision for the Round Table, gives way to a darker second act in which the Queen runs off with Lancelot, bringing the downfall of the kingdom. Lerner turns to the symbols of season-ness again, this time to express Lancelot's obsessional love for Guenevere in "If Ever I Would Leave

[23] D. McHugh, A. Asch, *Lyrics*, cit., pp. 268-269.
[24] D. McHugh, A. Asch, *Lyrics*, cit., p. 145.
[25] J. Naremore, *The Films of Vincente Minnelli*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 73.
[26] D. McHugh, A. Asch, *Lyrics*, cit., pp. 162-163.

You": «If ever I would leave you, / It wouldn't be in *summer* / [...] It couldn't be in *autumn* / [...] And could I leave you / [...] on a *wintry* evening / When you catch the fire's glow? / [...] Oh no, not in *springtime*» [my emphases].[27] Yet the all-encompassing nature of his love, expressed through endless time, neglects to take into account how the cycles of the year can reframe people's perspectives, and ultimately Guenevere will end up in a nunnery, parted from both her husband and her lover.

In fact, *Camelot*'s title song will articulate this point in a different way. The first time we hear it, in Arthur's opening gambit to Guenevere upon their initial meeting, Arthur's easy relationship with nature refers again to the seasons to express how in the ideal kingdom the seasons change with the passage of time, as they should: «The *winter* is forbidden till December, / And exits March the second on the dot. / By order *summer* lingers through September / In Camelot».[28] Here, seasons and months are combined to express the harmony of nature in Arthur's flawed but romantic idealism. But at the end of the musical, the song is reprised by Arthur to the young boy Tom, promoting the sense that reproducing memory («all the tales that you remember») can make strong ideas timeless («don't let it be forgot»), even if they are rooted in dreams rather than reality: «Each evening from December to December / Before you drift to sleep upon your cot, / Think back on all the tales that you remember / Of Camelot».[29] And it is this aspect of the song, specifically in its reprise form, that helped it to become a major part of the American Zeitgeist. First Lady Jackie Kennedy's interview with T.H. White (author of *The Once and Future King*, the novel on which the musical *Camelot* was based) in the immediate aftermath of President John F. Kennedy's assassination in 1963 included a direct quotation from her of the reprise: «Don't let it be forgot / That once there was a spot, / For one brief shining moment / That was known as Camelot». Using this memory as a metaphor for what America had just lost, she added: «There'll be great Presidents again – but there'll never be another Camelot again».[30]

If *Camelot* led to Lerner's most important cultural moment, *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever* (1965) was the musical that most intensely reflected his interests in the metaphysical. It concerns the reincarnation of an English woman from the 18th century called Melinda Wells as a woman in contemporary New York called Daisy Gamble. In addition to regressing into her former self under

[27] D. McHugh, A. Asch, *Lyrics*, cit., pp. 306-307.
[28] D. McHugh, A. Asch, *Lyrics*, cit., p. 292.
[29] D. McHugh, A. Asch, *Lyrics*, cit., p. 293.
[30] T.H. White, *An Epilogue for President Kennedy*, «Life», December 6, 1963.

hypnosis with Dr Mark Bruckner, Daisy also has extrasensory perception and is able to make flowers bloom more quickly. Lerner explores these ideas most potently in the song lyrics. In "Hurry, It's Lovely Up Here", Daisy uses telepathy to make the flowers grow, an idea communicated particularly vividly in the film version, which uses time-lapse camerawork to show flowers blooming rapidly.[31] Strikingly, in "When I Come Around Again", Mark's students mock the idea of reincarnation with which Mark is obsessed («Lord, send me back / [...] but be certain / Not to send back my wife»);[32] and in "What Did I Have that I Don't Have", Daisy reflects on the memory of her former self reincarnated, pondering why Mark is more interested in the projected memory of her previous form than in her current one («What would I give if my old know-how still knew how!»).[33]

Lerner himself was particularly fond of "Come Back to Me", in which Mark uses telepathy to persuade Daisy to return to him after they have fallen out: in the movie version, his voice appears to come out of the mouths of the people (and even a dog!) that Daisy encounters on the street.[34] This kind of apparition is another feature of Lerner's dramaturgy as a librettist that allowed him to explore dream-like states in his lyric writing. In *My Fair Lady* (1956), Eliza imagines the King coming to her rescue in "Just You Wait", her dreams of social mobility – a surprising reference to the American Dream in an apparently English work (by an Irish playwright!) – manifesting in the dream lyric «One day I'll be famous! I'll be proper and prim».[35] The show also features Lerner's most direct use of the passage of time in a song, "The Servants' Chorus", in which the hours are counted: «Nine p.m. / Ten p.m. / On through midnight ev'ry night».[36] Over a decade later, Lerner used innovative film technology in *Coco* (1969), his musical about the fashion icon Chanel, to create visions of the title character's former lover the Grand Duke Alexandrovitch of Imperial Russia ("But That's the Way You Are") and her late father ("Gabrielle"), the former including the memory theme («With your mem'ries of 'au revoir'»), the latter the dream theme («Dream away a little»).

By this mid-point in his career, the imagination and the subconscious are firmly rooted into his work, though sometimes he could not figure out a poet's solution to a dramaturgical problem. In *Lolita, My Love* (1971), his adaptation of Nabokov's controversial novel, Lerner failed to get around the problems of

[31] D. McHugh, A. Asch, *Lyrics*, cit., p. 329.
[32] D. McHugh, A. Asch, *Lyrics*, cit., pp. 337-338.
[33] D. McHugh, A. Asch, *Lyrics*, cit., pp. 338-339.
[34] D. McHugh, A. Asch, *Lyrics*, cit., pp. 341-342.
[35] D. McHugh, A. Asch, *Lyrics*, cit.., p. 214.
[36] D. McHugh, A. Asch, *Lyrics*, cit., p. 215.

putting a novel that is written entirely in the mind of an unreliable, perverted narrator onto the stage where the possibly imaginary plot is enacted too literally to be acceptable. Yet one final musical saw Lerner most poignantly using the topics explored here to critique the American Dream. *1600 Pennsylvania Avenue*, written with Leonard Bernstein in 1976, told the story of the first 100 years of the White House through the eyes of the two African American servants who took care of it. The Presidents and First Ladies were each played by one actor, Ken Howard and Patricia Routledge, and through the musical Lerner and Bernstein were responding angrily to the corruption of Richard Nixon as exposed by the Watergate scandal. The show was metatheatrical, and was presented as if a group of actors were just rehearsing a musical about the White House. At various points, they broke from their historical characters and commented on the events they were being asked to depict. The climax of the score was a song called «American Dreaming» at the height of the second act. The actor playing one of the two servants breaks ranks and refuses to go on ("Move it over, Mr Lincoln"), saying he can do no more American dreaming: «Drink up all the promises and drop off to sleep. / Dream of how we're equal now and wake up and weep». The actor playing the President joins him, agreeing that racism is America's original sin. He sings «Notify the meek that they are out of the will, / Just in case they are still / American dreaming».[37] The English poet Adrian Mitchell once commented: «Most people ignore most poetry because most poetry ignores most people».[38] And Matthew Arnold remarked: «Poetry is, at bottom, a criticism of life».[39] Commercially and critically, *1600* was a disaster, running on Broadway for only one week and losing around $1 million. Yet for Lerner, it was perhaps his most important and personal work. Here, he most critically engaged with American society and explored the flaws in the American Dream that led to serious inequities including racism. And with that, perhaps the librettist became a poet after all.

[37] D. McHugh, A. Asch, *Lyrics*, cit., pp. 488-492.
[38] A. Mitchell, *Poems,* London, Jonathan Cape, 1964, p. 8.
[39] M. Arnold, *The Study of Poetry* in *Essays*, second edition, 1891, p. 143.