

Margaret Gleason

Robynn Stilwell

Music and Dance in the U.S. (1932-1962)

Choreography Study 2

12/4/2020

Dancing Madly, Madly

An Analysis of the Choreography and Narrative of “Marian the Librarian”

Part of what makes society run is a shared understanding of spaces and the functions they serve. We know where we are supposed to drive our cars, which room stores the food, and what is and is not appropriate to wear in a restaurant. These agreements are so many and so ingrained that we rarely think of them -- until they are disrupted. In the dance break of “Marian the Librarian” from the 1962 film version of Meredith Willson’s *The Music Man*, we see the exciting and thought-provoking impact of flying in the face of a space’s norms expressed through movement and music. The musical tells the story of a small, fictional town in Iowa called River City that is turned on its head over the course of a summer by the arrival of a traveling salesman going by the name of Harold Hill. He is, in actuality, a con artist who makes his living by selling boys bands to communities across the country and then leaving town as soon as he’s pocketed the money. The only thing standing in his way in River City is the town’s piano teacher and librarian, Marian Paroo. Hill takes it upon himself to woo her into complicity, and this number is part of his plan. In it, Hill declares his love for her while simultaneously sowing the seeds of disruption in her traditional worldview through bringing noise and spontaneity into the quiet, controlled atmosphere of her library. The “Marian the Librarian” dance break effectively uses the contrasts of efficient and explosive movement, variations in precision and rhythm, and

exploration of space to illustrate the central tension between the film's main characters in a manner suited both to the flashiness of musical theater and the quiet sternness of this Iowa town.

The entire sequence has the feeling of a snowball racing down a hill, growing in size and velocity as it descends before returning to a gentle roll when it reaches the flat ground at the bottom. Here we find the first of several ways in which "Marian the Librarian" is a microcosm of *The Music Man's* larger thesis on how trends spread throughout a culture and the infectious nature of new ideas. What begins with one man carefully tapping his foot while sitting on a bench balloons into cartwheels and hitch kicks on top of tables, before ending in a happy medium with graceful partner dancing that keeps the joy of the dance break's peak but echoes some of the beginning's restraint. This evolution is shown not only in the choreography itself but also in the number of dancers engaged in the choreography at any given moment. Hill is unequivocally shown as the instigator, literally elbowing the young men at the table with him to get them involved in the dance. Then, as these things often go, each person pulled in brings a few others along with them, so by the sequence's climax there isn't a person in the library who's not fully engaged in the dance.

The relationship between choreography and music reflects this pattern as well. When the dance break begins, each movement is punctuated in the orchestrations. The foot tapping matches a flutter on the snare and the elbowing a pluck on the strings. Nearly every motion in the first section where Hill dances with the boys is matched by a musical phrase; even when the orchestration drops out, a brief softshoe interlude is there to keep time. As the song progresses, however, and the enthusiasm in the library builds, the dancing develops a different relationship to the music. While never going out of sync or completely against one another, it becomes more of a back and forth, a conversation. Rather than match accents in the music exactly, the sound of

feet kicking and shuffling begins to layer its own rhythm on top of the score, demonstrating how the young people spending their afternoon at the library are beginning to color a bit outside the lines. Perhaps the most literal representation of this theme comes when sweethearts Zaneeta Shinn and Tommy Djilas – the mayor’s eldest daughter and the town rebel who are pursuing a courtship against her father’s wishes – act out an abbreviated, balletic version of the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet* while Zaneeta holds a conspicuously large copy of the play. Literature and dance combined can set young minds free, and that’s what a union of Paroo and Hill would represent (at least according to this number). By the end of the sequence, this is what we see, as Paroo is gracefully whisked around the library floor by rows of polite young men. Enjoying herself after putting up quite a fight, she even flings off her glasses -- the ultimate cinematic symbol of a wallflower becoming a social butterfly. While this new, unencumbered energy does not even last to the end of the song, it’s an inkling of what is to come later in the film and the choreography deftly foreshadows that.

The snowball effect acknowledged, it’s also worth noting that even at its most exuberant, the choreography in “Marian the Librarian” maintains a high level of precision and rhythm. Much of the choreography is



centered on detailed footwork, carefully extended limbs, and playing with angles. The dancers remain upright with their cores held tight, never letting any movement be anything less than exact. The closest the choreography ever gets to out of hand is a moment when Paroo, at her maximum level of loose, attempts a softshoe (that more closely resembles a stomp) on one of the library tables – an act that swiftly gets her a shushing from the rest of the dancers. The tone of

the piece is controlled catharsis. The young people of this upstanding Iowa town are expected to grow into the mold their parents designed for them and, for the most part, they don't mind it. In this moment together, however, and in similar numbers like "76 Trombones," which is heard here as a musical motif, they get to experiment with unbridled joy separate from that famous Iowa stubbornness. But they aren't interested in true rebellion, so they express this new lease on life through balletic leaps and judiciously repeated hitch kicks evenly spaced throughout the library. After all, we wouldn't want to risk a collision now would we?

The library itself plays a large role in creating the tone and energy of "Marian the Librarian." Though not cold, the set is a bit austere, filled with straight lines and muted colors. The dancers are by far the brightest thing in the room in their gentle pastels and earth tones. This allows the library to become a playground for them, transforming into the balcony scene mentioned before or a dance hall. Early on in the sequence, the rules of the space dictate where the people go. They sit at tables and on benches, they line up carefully to get their books stamped, they file obediently up and down the stairs. The space dominates. As the music and energy swell, suddenly the space becomes theirs. They begin to dominate. Couples take advantage of the open, rugless floors to execute sharp lifts, the girls' legs demurely above their heads as their partners lift them onto the tables. Clutter-free walkways make for the perfect place for a line of chassés and a few skips. One of the number's most impactful moments comes when



Paroo whirls around as the camera zooms out to reveal young people joyously dancing in every corner of the library. Their costumes pop against the blue-grey walls and one can almost feel the dust

flying up from the floor as they lightly land after a jump. Rather than allow the space to dictate their behavior, they are now defining their own relationship to the space.

Libraries are sacred to many, but some are repelled by their rigid formality. What "Marian the Librarian" shows us is the wonder and joy that could, and arguably ought to, accompany spaces designed for curiosity and discovery. Though River City is not destined to be a freewheeling party town, the catharsis and delight expressed through the buoyant, upward-moving choreography of this song speaks to why Hill's boy band proposition so tightly grips the heart of the young people of this community. Used to marching right on rhythm and falling in line, the townspeople are easily drawn out of their shells and start to create their own beat, much as Paroo herself is doing with her literary ways and rejection of typical society. "Marian the Librarian" is proof that, at their core, Hill and Paroo's goals for the next generation of "River Citi-ziens" are not as at odds as they may appear at first glance. While maintaining the consideration and care associated with Midwestern culture through precision of movement and orderly staging, the number's high kicks and jumps, its twirls and dips, and its earnest, unabashed happiness demonstrate the power of music and movement to unlock something deep in a person's soul, and perhaps gives Paroo the key to open up that same part of her own heart and begin to let in a bit of Hill's magic, illusion though it may be.

Bibliography

DaCosta, Morton, director. *The Music Man*. *Amazon Prime Video*, Warner Bros, 1962,

www.amazon.com/Music-Man-Robert-Preston/dp/B0093Q9YNO/ref=sr_1_1?crd=AF9QIWPXE8QA&dchild=1&keywords=the+music+man&qid=1607056418&s=instant-video&srefix=the+music+man%2Caps%2C251&sr=1-1.