

The Role of Chorus in Musical Theatre

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Abstract. The chorus has been a foundational element in theatrical tradition since ancient Greece, where it served as a narrative and moral guide. In the context of modern musical theatre, however, the chorus has evolved into a multifaceted performance ensemble that contributes significantly to the narrative, emotional, social, and aesthetic dimensions of a production. This study explores the complex roles played by the chorus in musical theatre through a qualitative analysis of literature and selected case studies, including *Les Misérables*, *West Side Story*, *Hamilton*, *Rent*, and *Hadestown*. Using a thematic content analysis approach, the research identifies four primary functions of the chorus: narrative support, emotional amplification, sociopolitical representation, and aesthetic enhancement. The findings reveal that the chorus is not a secondary or decorative element but a central storytelling mechanism that engages audiences and deepens dramatic impact. Furthermore, the paper highlights the chorus's capacity to embody collective identities, reflect political themes, and enhance performative spectacle. The discussion also emphasizes the need for greater recognition of ensemble labor in both academic and professional contexts. This study contributes to ongoing scholarship in musical theatre by reasserting the importance of the chorus as a dynamic, expressive, and ideologically significant force within the genre.

Keywords: chorus, musical theatre, drama, dance, classical, acting, libretto

1. Introduction

Musical theatre, a vibrant hybrid of drama, music, and dance, is an art form that balances the individual and the collective to tell compelling stories. While star performers and lead roles often capture the spotlight, the chorus—sometimes referred to as the ensemble—is an equally vital component that shapes the thematic and emotional fabric of a production. The chorus traditionally comprises a group of performers who sing, dance, and occasionally act in unison or harmony to support the story's central action. Their contributions, though often under-acknowledged, play an essential role in

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advancing plot, establishing mood, and enhancing the overall aesthetic of the performance (Miller, 2007).

Historically, the chorus can trace its roots to classical Greek theatre, where it served as the moral and emotional commentator of the play, often representing the voice of the community or society at large (Brockett & Hildy, 2014). Over time, this classical role evolved, particularly in opera and operetta, which laid the groundwork for the Broadway-style musical. In modern musical theatre, the chorus is no longer a mere narrator; it has become a dynamic and versatile force capable of shaping action, symbolizing collective identity, and interacting directly with principal characters (McMillin, 2006).

Modern musicals frequently utilize the chorus not only for practical storytelling purposes but also to reflect larger societal themes or tensions. In productions like *Les Misérables*, the chorus represents the suffering masses during revolutionary France, while in *Hamilton*, the ensemble helps drive narrative momentum and stylized storytelling through hip-hop choreography and layered vocals (Miranda, 2015). These examples illustrate that the chorus operates at both micro and macro levels: as background players and as vital narrative engines.

Furthermore, the role of the chorus has evolved in tandem with developments in choreography, direction, and scenography. Directors and choreographers such as Jerome Robbins and Bob Fosse redefined the ensemble's potential by integrating dance and movement in ways that made the chorus an expressive extension of the musical's themes (Knapp, 2005). In contemporary theatre, ensemble members are often expected to be "triple threats"—equally adept at singing, dancing, and acting—reflecting the increasing technical and artistic demands of the role (Symonds & Taylor, 2014).

Given the chorus's wide-ranging functions—from atmospheric enhancement to political symbolism—this paper aims to explore the multifaceted role of the chorus in musical theatre. By reviewing relevant literature and analyzing iconic productions, this study investigates how the chorus contributes to storytelling, emotional depth, and theatrical spectacle in modern musical theatre (Ahmedova, 2025).

2. Methods

This study utilized a qualitative, interpretive research design to investigate the role of the chorus in musical theatre. The primary goal was to explore the functions, representations, and contributions of the chorus in various musical theatre productions through literature review, textual analysis, and case study examination.

2.1 Data Sources

The research drew on a wide range of secondary sources, including academic journal articles, books on musical theatre theory and history, production scripts, and critical reviews. Databases such as JSTOR, Project MUSE, Google Scholar, and the International Bibliography of Theatre & Dance were used to locate relevant peer-reviewed material published between 2000 and 2024. Key texts included *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical* (Everett & Laird, 2008), *The Musical as Drama* (McMillin, 2006), and *Changed for Good* (Wolf, 2011), among others.

2.2 Selection Criteria

The selection of musicals for case study analysis was based on the following criteria:

- Cultural and historical significance in the development of musical theatre;
- Prominent and purposeful use of chorus or ensemble in storytelling or staging;
- Diversity of genre and era, to represent a range of styles and thematic approaches;
- Availability of performance documentation, such as librettos, cast recordings, and scholarly analyses.

Based on these criteria, the following musicals were selected for close analysis:

- *Les Misérables* (1980)
- *West Side Story* (1957)
- *Hamilton* (2015)
- *Rent* (1996)
- *Hadestown* (2016)

These productions were chosen to reflect a mix of classical and contemporary works, and to explore different narrative and social functions of the chorus across time.

2.3 Analytical Approach

A thematic content analysis was used to identify recurring functions and representations of the chorus. Each musical was examined for how the chorus contributed to:

- Narrative progression (e.g., exposition, conflict, resolution),
- Emotional amplification (e.g., reinforcing mood or protagonist emotions),
- Sociopolitical commentary (e.g., representing marginalized or collective voices),
- Aesthetic and performative impact (e.g., choreography, harmony, and staging).

Choral numbers and ensemble scenes were analyzed for lyrical content, staging, and interaction with lead characters. Where available, video recordings of performances were reviewed to assess choreography, spatial arrangement, and audience reception.

Finally, findings from these analyses were synthesized into three major thematic functions of the chorus, which are presented in the Results section.

3. Results

The thematic analysis of literature and case studies revealed that the chorus in musical theatre fulfills a range of interconnected functions. These were categorized into four key thematic roles: narrative

support, emotional amplification, sociopolitical representation, and aesthetic enhancement (Sadikhova, 2024). Each theme emerged consistently across classical and contemporary musicals, with evolving emphasis depending on the style, era, and intent of the production.

3.1 Narrative Support

One of the most prominent and consistent functions of the chorus is its role in advancing or supporting the narrative. The chorus often serves as an expository device, providing context, transitions, or commentary that guides the audience's understanding of the plot.

For example, in *Les Misérables*, the opening ensemble number “Look Down” introduces the plight of the poor and frames the oppressive conditions of 19th-century France. Later in the show, “Do You Hear the People Sing?” rallies the chorus as revolutionaries, transforming them into agents of the story rather than passive observers (Schonberg & Boublil, 1980).

In *Hamilton*, the chorus functions almost like a living Greek chorus, offering real-time commentary and framing events in a historical context. The song “The Battle of Yorktown (The World Turned Upside Down)” uses layered ensemble voices to highlight the chaos and turning point of the war, driving the narrative momentum (Miranda, 2015).

3.2 Emotional Amplification

The chorus frequently acts as an emotional barometer within the musical, reflecting or intensifying the psychological states of lead characters or the mood of a scene. This amplification serves to externalize internal feelings and draw the audience more deeply into the emotional arc of the narrative.

In *West Side Story*, the chorus plays a crucial role in scenes like “Tonight (Quintet)”, where multiple characters express different desires and fears simultaneously. The ensemble's voices intertwine in polyphonic texture, building tension and anticipation before the violent climax (Bernstein & Sondheim, 1957).

In *Rent*, the ensemble becomes a stand-in for a generation facing the AIDS crisis, poverty, and urban alienation. Numbers like “Seasons of Love” are emotionally resonant because they use collective voices to pose existential questions about time, love, and loss (Larson, 1996).

3.3 Sociopolitical Representation

A more contemporary and increasingly prominent function of the chorus is as a symbolic representation of marginalized or collective voices. The chorus often speaks (or sings) not only for themselves but for broader social groups—whether revolutionaries, immigrants, workers, or oppressed communities (Gulkhara & Farzaliyeva, 2025).

In *Hadestown*, the chorus of Workers serves as a symbol of exploited labor under capitalist oppression. Their recurring presence throughout the musical emphasizes themes of struggle, resilience, and fatalism in the face of power. Songs like “Why We Build the Wall” use repetition and ensemble unison to critique systemic exploitation and authoritarianism (Mitchell, 2016).

Similarly, in *Hamilton*, the racially diverse ensemble challenges traditional historical narratives by embodying a reimagined America. They actively participate in rewriting history from a different perspective, blurring the line between past and present sociopolitical discourse (Miranda, 2015).

3.4 Aesthetic and Performative Enhancement

Finally, the chorus significantly contributes to the visual and sonic tapestry of musical theatre. Through choreography, harmony, costume, and spatial design, the ensemble adds depth and rhythm to the production.

The choreography in *Hamilton*—designed by Andy Blankenbuehler—is a prime example of how the chorus acts as a physical extension of music and emotion. The ensemble often moves in sharp, stylized unison, reflecting internal conflicts and dynamic historical change. Their physical presence functions almost as scenery, framing the action and highlighting key moments without the need for complex sets.

In *West Side Story*, Jerome Robbins’ choreography uses the chorus in dance-fight scenes like “The Rumble”, turning the ensemble into a kinetic metaphor for violence and tribalism. The tight coordination between music and movement elevates the emotional and thematic stakes of the scene (Bernstein & Sondheim, 1957).

Summary of Key Roles of the Chorus in Musical Theatre

<i>Function</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Example Musicals</i>
Narrative Support	Chorus provides exposition, transitions, or context	<i>Les Misérables, Hamilton</i>
Emotional Amplification	Chorus mirrors or enhances emotional tone	<i>West Side Story, Rent</i>
Sociopolitical Representation	Chorus symbolizes collective or marginalized voices	<i>Hadestown, Hamilton</i>
Sociopolitical Representation	Chorus symbolizes collective or marginalized voices	<i>Hadestown, Hamilton</i>
Aesthetic Enhancement	Chorus enhances visual, rhythmic, and musical texture	<i>Hamilton, West Side Story</i>

4. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the chorus as a dynamic and multi-functional element in musical theatre—far more than a background ensemble. Its ability to operate simultaneously as a narrative device, emotional mirror, socio-political symbol, and aesthetic component underscores its centrality to the theatrical experience. These findings challenge traditional hierarchies in musical theatre that prioritize lead roles while relegating chorus members to supporting positions.

4.1 The Chorus as a Dramaturgical Tool

As revealed in the case studies, the chorus serves crucial dramaturgical functions that support and often drive the storytelling process. In both *Les Misérables* and *Hamilton*, the ensemble is essential to establishing setting, political context, and thematic tone. This aligns with McMillin's (2006) argument that the ensemble helps structure a musical as a "dramatic organism," allowing the narrative to flow through collective as well as individual voices.

The chorus often acts as a bridge between the audience and the characters. Through direct address or collective presence, the chorus can narrate, comment, or provide moral interpretation of the plot. This recalls the tradition of the Greek chorus, whose primary function was to guide audience interpretation and underscore the moral or philosophical underpinnings of a play (Brockett & Hildy, 2014). The continuity of this function in modern musicals suggests a lasting lineage of performative commentary and mediation.

4.2 Embodying Collective Emotion and Voice

One of the most potent functions of the chorus is its ability to embody collective emotion. As demonstrated in *West Side Story* and *Rent*, the chorus magnifies the emotional stakes of individual characters or dramatic moments. The ensemble's synchronization—whether in song, dance, or stillness—provides an emotional resonance that would be difficult to achieve with solo performance alone.

This emotional amplification is not merely aesthetic but serves a cognitive and affective purpose, helping audiences internalize and process the emotions of the story on a collective level (Symonds & Taylor, 2014). In this way, the chorus becomes not just a reflection of characters' emotions, but a vessel through which audience emotions are shaped.

4.3 Political and Social Dimensions of the Chorus

Contemporary musicals increasingly use the chorus to explore sociopolitical themes. In *Hadestown*, for example, the ensemble functions as a metaphor for systemic oppression, representing workers who are voiceless, exploited, and caught in an endless cycle. Similarly, *Hamilton* uses a diverse ensemble to reframe the founding of America through the lens of race, immigration, and opportunity. In both cases, the chorus is not merely decorative—it is ideologically charged.

This shift toward politically engaged chorus work reflects larger trends in theatre and performance studies, where collectivity is often used to critique dominant power structures and articulate counter-narratives (Wolf, 2011). The chorus thus becomes a performative agent of resistance and inclusion, capable of transforming a personal narrative into a collective call for awareness or change.

4.4 Re-evaluating Ensemble Labor and Visibility

Another important consideration raised by this analysis is the often underappreciated labor of ensemble performers. Despite their central role in delivering complex choreography, tight harmonies, and emotional cohesion, chorus members tend to receive less recognition and remuneration compared to leading actors (Miller, 2007). This invisibility extends beyond the stage to awards systems, press coverage, and casting hierarchies.

Given the increasing technical and artistic demands placed on ensemble performers—particularly in choreography-heavy productions like *Hamilton* or *Six*—there is a growing need to re-evaluate how ensemble labor is valued. As Symonds and Taylor (2014) argue, the rise of the “triple threat” performer reflects both the evolution of the form and the heightened expectations of chorus members as integral co-creators of the theatrical experience.

4.5 Limitations and Areas for Further Research

This study was limited by its reliance on secondary sources and pre-selected canonical musicals. Future research could incorporate ethnographic or practice-based methodologies, such as interviews with chorus performers, directors, and choreographers. There is also room for exploring non-Western musical theatre traditions and how ensemble performance is conceptualized in those contexts.

Furthermore, the increasing integration of digital media and projection design in theatre offers new possibilities for the representation of collective bodies. Future work might examine how the traditional chorus evolves in virtual or hybrid performance spaces, and whether digital technologies extend or diminish the role of the ensemble.

5. Conclusion

The chorus has long been an essential but often underexamined element of musical theatre. This study has demonstrated that the chorus is not merely a background presence or filler between principal scenes, but a complex, multifaceted component of performance that deeply influences narrative structure, emotional resonance, sociopolitical commentary, and aesthetic richness (Gulkhara & Kamran, 2025). By examining key productions such as *Les Misérables*, *Hamilton*, *West Side Story*, *Rent*, and *Hedestown*, this paper has shown how the chorus functions simultaneously as narrator, emotional amplifier, symbolic community, and visual spectacle.

The analysis affirms that the chorus plays a central dramaturgical role in shaping the meaning and impact of a musical. Whether through setting the scene, embodying communal struggles, or enhancing dramatic tension, the ensemble provides a dynamic and often transformative lens through which the audience experiences the story. The chorus also has unique power in terms of representation—giving voice to groups, emotions, and perspectives that might otherwise remain silent in solo-driven narratives.

Importantly, the evolving function of the chorus mirrors broader shifts in theatrical practice and cultural consciousness. As musical theatre has become more politically and socially engaged, the chorus has increasingly taken on the role of a collective conscience, providing commentary on issues such as inequality, marginalization, and resistance. This signals a movement away from passive ensemble work and toward a more active, ideologically charged form of group performance.

The study also underscores the need to reassess the visibility and value of ensemble labor in the professional theatre industry. Chorus members are often required to perform with a high degree of versatility and technical skill, yet remain undervalued in recognition and compensation. Greater

academic and industry attention to ensemble work can help redress this imbalance and elevate the artistic status of the chorus.

Future research might explore chorus work in lesser-known or experimental productions, examine ensemble practices in non-Western or global musical traditions, and analyze how digital technologies are reshaping the idea of collectivity on stage. As theatre continues to evolve, so too does the creative potential of the chorus—not merely as a support mechanism, but as a central artistic and political force in musical storytelling.

In conclusion, the chorus is indispensable to musical theatre's ability to move, provoke, and inspire. Its functions are not only performative but deeply expressive of the shared human experiences that define the genre itself. As the stage becomes an increasingly complex space for storytelling, identity, and engagement, the chorus stands at the heart of this evolution—singing, moving, and speaking not just for the characters, but for the audience, and the world beyond the proscenium.

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