If You Can’t Be Gay and Merry: Anchors Aweigh and Altman’s Homosocial to Heterosexual Theory

Zachary Aaron Wendeln ‘15
Majors: English; Film, Television, and Theater

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Professor Pamela Wojcik
Write a seven page paper analyzing a single musical film chosen from among films shown (required and recommended) in the first six weeks of class. Your paper will analyze how the film’s musical numbers relate to the narrative (reflecting themes of the narrative, advancing the plot, structuring the romance, showing dualisms, contradicting the plot, etc.)
In his essay "From Homosocial to Heterosexual: The Musical's Two Projects," Rick Altman claims that the overarching goal of the movie musical is to create a heterosexual pairing that resolves the narrative and thematic conflicts of the film as a whole. Altman positions this development as a movement away from "inappropriate" (in the sense that they prevent heterosexual coupling) homosocial relationships toward the final marriage—either literal or figurative—of the central heterosexual couple(s). In George Sidney's Anchors Aweigh (1945), two sailors on leave, Joseph "Joe" Brady (Gene Kelly) and Clarence "Brooklyn" Doolittle (Frank Sinatra), break away from the homosocial society of the Navy and enter into the heterosocial world of Los Angeles. On the surface, their primary goal appears to be to successfully woo—and possibly wed—gorgeous "dames," who appear in the forms of Susan "Susie" Abbott (Kathryn Grayson) and The Girl From Brooklyn (Pamela Briton). While Anchors Aweigh ultimately adheres to Altman's notion of homosocial-to-heterosexual narrative movement, abandoning the tight-knit male relationship between Joe and Clarence for the formation of "proper" heterosexual pairings—Joe and Susie, and Clarence and Brooklyn—the character of Clarence problematizes this reading of the film. Through his relationships—with regard to both numbers and narrative—with Joe, Susie, and the girl from Brooklyn, Clarence can be read as representing the iconic figure of the gay sailor, allowing for the potentiality of movement from homosocial to homosexual, rather than heterosexual.

According to Rick Altman, the central driving force of every musical is the formation of the heterosexual couple, which is facilitated by a movement away from "homosocial" groupings and other "wrong" romantic pairings. As he notes in his essay, "From Homosocial to Heterosexual," "Individual [musicals] are thus seen through the regular alternation between the heterosexual partners whose union constitutes the text's conclusion" (Altman 20). The narrative of any given musical reaches a resolution only through the marriage of male and female and the merging of the individual partners' respective values.

While such seamless conclusion is the goal toward which the plot and numbers strive, "the majority of the film seems populated by mismatches, by potential couples that are unacceptable for one reason or another" (Altman 22). The beginnings and middles of musical narratives find each member of the eventual heterosexual couple paired with "wrong" partners. These mismatched partners come in all shapes, sizes, ages, species, and genders. For example, Joe is initially matched with the enigmatic, disembodied and devocalized Lola, with whom the viewer expects him to reunite by the end of the film based on their apparent chemistry. Joe is also incorrectly paired with the cartoon character Jerry the Mouse in a frame narrative, in which the two dance and sing "The Worry Song." The two are clearly
incompatible because one is real, the other imaginary; one is a mouse, the other a man; and both are (presumably) male. Joe's final inappropriate pairing is with a little beggar girl (Sharon McManus), with whom he dances "The Mexican Hat Dance." Being at most only ten years old, however, McManus is clearly not a suitable partner for the mature, thirty-something Joe. Similarly, Susan is given a series of highly incompatible partners as well. She is paired with an elderly couple; her nephew, Donald (Dean Stockwell); and a foppish Hollywood studio representative. The failure of each indicates Susie has yet to discover the perfect heterosexual partner.

On one level, these incorrect couplings guide the viewer and narrative toward a heterosexual resolution. Altman suggests that "to better define the 'right' type of couple, it is necessary to provide several contrasting examples of 'wrong' couples" (Altman 24). If the viewer is given a handful of people to pair with the two leads, all of whom are discredited one after the other as potential partners for the leads, the viewer will come to see the male and female leads as the only potentially functional couple in the narrative. Consider Susie's primary incompatible partner in the movie: Clarence. When Susie is presented as Clarence's love interest after a series of wrong matches, the viewer begins to think he/she sees the makings of a proper heterosexual couple. However, it soon becomes clear that Clarence, too, is not quite right for Susie. Joe, not Clarence, asks Susie out on a date with Clarence. Joe and Susie bicker, implying mounting sexual tension. Joe even escorts the two supposed lovebirds on their first date. It becomes perfectly clear that Joe is Susie's intended when she sings "Jealousy" in the night club. Initially moving toward and singing to Clarence, Susie's eye soon wanders to Joe. The camera mirrors this movement, capturing more of Joe's passionate reactions to Susie's song than Clarence's.

Two other songs solidify Joe and Susie as the perfect heterosexual couple. The first, Clarence's "I Fall in Love Too Easily," confirms his affections for the girl from Brooklyn and not Susie. The second, Joe's "La Cumparsita" dance, heightens the sexual tension between him and Susie before diffusing it with an ardent kiss. He begins the song arguing that "Words like [I love you] don't go with sailor suits and three-day leaves and the world [sailors] live in;" rather, "They go with that world, of cloaks, swords." His dance transforms into a fantastical, sex as adventure sequence in which he, dressed as a bandit chief, performs a spectacular tap routine for Susie, reimagined as a princess. In the end, the two passionately embrace and kiss. In this way, the musical guides the viewer toward perceiving the eventual heterosexual pair as the right one. Both men and both women find their respective, "correct" (hetero)sexual partners through a series of false calls.

On another level, however, this relationship trajectory also works to liberate the male and female leads from their respective homosocial environments. By homosocial, Altman refers to all-male
and all-female groups, usually platonic in nature. The musical establishes these pairings of male and female friends as relationships that prevent the proper maturation—and heterosexual awakening—of the characters. In Anchors Aweigh, this retreat from the homosocial sphere is most important for Joe and Clarence because they come from the hyper-masculine world of the Navy and have a deep bond with each other, whereas Susie begins the movie on her own, already separated from female society. Altman treats the move from homosocial to heterosexual as a rite of passage: "Homosocial relationships, dominant in musical beginnings, must be put away in favour of the heterosexual relationships that dominate musical endings" (Altman 28).

The male and female leads, respectively, must branch out from their homosocial friend groups in order to find love in a heteronormative sense. This movement from homosocial to heterosexual implies that only a heterosexual coupling can lead to resolution and harmony. Altman's dual focus structure seems to be "implicitly foregrounding the absent homosexual category" as an attempt to preserve the highly valued heterosexual marriage from a threat presented by any potential "deviant" sexual pairing; "the passage from homosocial to heterosexual specifically negates the alternative possibility of movement from relationships that are only homosocial to fully homosexual bonds" (Altman 28). Because the musical encourages the virtues of the heterosexual relationship, writing it as the narrative salvation of any given plot, no musical can end with a homosexual pairing. To do so would be to irreparably damage the unquestionable structure of the heteronormative world in which musicals exist.

Clarence's character complicates the smooth passage from homosocial to heterosexual pairings, however, by introducing strong homoerotic undertones through his interactions with Joe. It is important here to consider the trope of the "gay sailor" that appears in popular culture as a fetishized gay fantasy, an identity that Clarence arguably embodies for the first two-thirds of this film. Because the figure of the male sailor exists as a signifier of homosexuality across multiple media in popular culture, here specifically in film and the musical, it is helpful to situate ourselves within the socio-historical framework from which the iconic "gay sailor" emerged. All-male organizations like the Navy have a tendency to be homoeroticized by society throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. One could view "the ship as a community in which sailors forged their own unique social relations and in which the seamen's cramped living quarters created a densely communal social life" (Maynard 150). When looking at the American Navy in the mid-Twentieth century specifically—the period in which Anchors Aweigh takes place—the denial of the presence of women in the Navy makes the environment on a ship hyper-masculine, as these tight spaces were crammed with youthful, healthy, and physically fit
Think of the opening scene in *Anchors Aweigh*: the cabins below in which crowd burly sailors in their tight undershirts, leaning against and conversing with one another. It is no wonder, then, how those civilians back on the mainland could interpret this atmosphere as homoerotically charged.

In popular depictions of Naval sailors, one finds it quite easy to read a certain homosexual subtext into these characters. Filmic depictions of sailors place "a lot of interest in uniform, including trousers" as an implicitly "gay" identifier (Baker 6). Something about tight, bellbottom trousers registers as gay to viewers, perhaps because they accentuate the hyper-masculine body of the sailor in a feminine way, through tight, flashy costuming. The sailor becomes fetishized and queered because of his costume. Clarence and Joe each represent one of the dual aspects of this feminized yet hyper-masculine figure. Clarence physically appears and acts rather effeminate. His uniform hangs loosely over his slim frame. He wears his hat tipped up and back on his head as if he is worried it will mess up his hair. He twirls the end of his neckerchief like a girl plays with her hair. Sinatra's facial features add to this effect, his round and high cheekbones and bright blue eyes making him appear doll-like and precious. Joe, on the other hand, represents the ideal or "iconic 'sailor,' that ultra-butch symbol of a particular kind of sexuality—horny, macho and stiff-pricked" (Baker 13). His uniform fits particularly tightly over his toned body, accentuating his chest and buttocks. His very demeanor projects confidence and sexual prowess, as does his skill at bullshitting other equally masculine men about his sexual conquests. Joe becomes somewhat of an idol or model of sexuality and masculinity for Clarence, his own personal fetish in a way. As Baker notes, this ideal sailor "was not a part of [gay sailors'] lived daily life though he could be something they fantasized over" (Baker 13). Joe plays this role for Clarence, mentoring him on how to pick up dames, how to carry himself like a man, and how to fool other men into thinking he is more of a man than he really is. Clarence refers to Joe as "the best wolf in the whole Navy," clearly idolizing, envying, and potentially lusting after Joe's sexuality.

This subtly homosexual dynamic plays out in a few key scenes between Clarence and Joe, in which Clarence's physical relationship to Joe and his mannerisms in general indicate a potential move from homosocial to homosexual. The two sailors' physical intimacy comes across most blatantly in scenes in which Joe is on the phone with his lover, Lola. When the men first depart from the ship, Joe rushes to a payphone to call Lola and set up a time for the two to meet. The shot cuts to a close-up of Joe on the phone, stroking the mouthpiece, lips almost touching it and grinning. The framing is highly intimate and suggestive, the close-up calling attention to Joe's lips, teeth, tongue, and strong jaw line. The scene then cuts to a medium shot of Joe on the phone with Clarence pressed up against him from behind, his head touching Joe's, trying to catch the conversation. What begins as an intimate moment
between Joe and his (heterosexual) lover expands into a homoerotic moment when Clarence enters the frame. A similar physical arrangement occurs when Joe is on phone with Lola at Susie's house. He lies on the couch, caressing the arm of couch, while he smoothly seduces the woman on the other end of the line. The shot widens to show Clarence cradling him from behind, his chin resting on Joe's shoulder. It even appears that Clarence's hand is on Joe's thigh. Again, Clarence's physical intimacy with Joe, combined with the fact that Joe is less upset with this physicality than with the fact that Clarence is eavesdropping, detracts from the heterosexuality of the scene, opening up the potential for a homosexual reading of their relationship.

Clarence's sexuality and his interest in Joe are put into question again in the scene in which it appears that he is stalking Joe through the streets of Los Angeles. At the beginning of the sequence, Joe checks out a woman's backside as she walks past him. Lagging behind, Clarence pushes past two beautiful women, taking no notice, fixated on Joe who's just up the street. The contrast between Joe's hyper-heterosexual attraction to women and Clarence's fixation on Joe suggests Clarence chases Joe in the same way Joe chases women. At one point, Joe pauses and checks out a cardboard cutout of a woman in a bikini. Clarence catches up with him and leans against storefront wall, arms crossed, one leg crooked over the other. This is a highly suggestive stance, an image of cruising, solicitation. Clarence smiles and waves coyly at Joe, who replies with a hesitant wave. Clarence's mannerisms call to mind gay prostitutes who roamed the streets of big cities like Los Angeles and who would have probably solicited sex from the "iconic sailor" type like Joe.

This pseudo-pickup leads to a chase sequence between the two men, Joe apparently trying to escape Clarence. It is as if Joe is attempting to maintain the homosocial-to-heterosexual trajectory of the narrative by fleeing the homosexual potential Clarence's infatuation with him represents. At the end of the sequence, after Clarence catches up with Joe and admits that he needs his sexual guidance, a sort of role-playing ensues between the two men. "Pick me up," Joe commands. Joe pretends to be "a dame," sauntering down the sidewalk, butt swinging from side to side, hand on his hip. When Clarence makes a weak pass at Joe, the latter tells him, "You gotta give it more mmmhhrrrrrr!" This exchange reinforces the idea of Clarence as feminized gay sailor seeking mentorship and otherwise from the hyper-masculine, sexually capable ideal sailor. The film diffuses the homosexual potential of the scene, however, when an older gentleman walks into shot, turning the scene into a comic moment. Joe looks up surprised and embarrassed and leads Clarence away from man, who stares after them, disgusted. While suggestions of a homoerotic reading appear embedded in the narrative, the film constantly attempts to combat and suppress them to forward the movement toward heterosexual union instead.
These narrative interactions are punctuated by two key duets between Joe and Clarence that reinforce the potential swing from hetero- to homosexual affections on Clarence’s behalf. On a general note, only three out of the twelve sung songs are performed by Susie, who is also the only female to perform in the movie. The list of numbers itself is inherently homosocial, centered on Joe and Clarence and lending the film as a whole to homosexual potentiality. It should also be noted that Joe and Susie never perform together (nor do Clarence and the girl from Brooklyn). Joe dances for Susie ("La Cumparsita"), but they are never in the same shot during this routine except for the beginning and end. More specifically, three of the twelve sung songs are performed by both Joe and Clarence. All three involve performing masculinity/heterosexuality to cover for their lack of heterosexual action. All, in addition, are performed for other men whom Joe and Clarence perceive as threats to their sexuality. This paper will focus on two of the three duets, "We Hate to Leave" and "I Begged Her," the third, "If You Knew Susie," being less homoerotically suggestive and therefore not as significant to this study of the characters' relationship to each other and to the broader scope of the homosocial-to-heterosexual push of the narrative.

The first of these homosocial duets, "We Hate to Leave," establishes the theme of performing masculinity and heterosexuality to overcompensate and apologize for the homosexual potential that exists between Clarence and Joe. At the beginning of the number, Joe brags about his girl, Lola. The viewer cannot tell whether "Lola" is part of his elaborate lie to impress the other sailors or an actual woman waiting for him in Los Angeles. Joe reclines suggestively on a table in the cabin during his spiel; Clarence rests his chin on Joe’s arm. Clarence places his hand on Joe’s knee at the start of song, establishing their physical intimacy. The context of the song itself is the two men sarcastically lamenting their plight of being on leave, facetiously dreading the prospect of courting beautiful women and claiming they would prefer to remain in the homosocial society of their fellow sailors. Clarence claims, "Our hearts are with the ship!" This phrase could be read ironically or literally as a lingering desire to remain in the homosocial(sexual) world of the Navy rather than venture into the disagreeable heterosocial/sexual world of the city. Flamboyant, affected dialogue and movements abound in this number. Clarence and Joe wiggle their fingers flirtatiously while backing toward cabin door, clapping and skipping with glee at the prospect of their leave. One of the most striking lyrics in the song is sung by Joe: "But the admiral made us take this leave / he beat us with a whip!" If read with the socio-historical context of gay men serving in the U.S. navy in mind, this lyric could allude to the use of corporal punishment on U.S. ships as a means for curbing homosexual activity. Maynard notes that "Senate executive documents list homosexual offences aboard U.S. vessels including flogging for
'homosexual crimes'" (Maynard 151-52). Thus, a homosexual reading of the Clarence-Joe relationship is embedded within the lyrics of the number.

Their second significant duet, "I Begged Her," similarly finds the two sailors claiming to be more (hetero)sexually experienced than they truly are. At the beginning of the number, Joe stops Clarence from mentioning the little boy Donald in front of the other sailors at the Navy hostel. Picking up a young boy would read as homosexual, not to mention pedophilic. Joe covers and makes it sound like they picked up chicks instead. The context of the number echoes that of "We Hate to Leave," the two leading men bullshitting the other sailors into thinking they're more masculine and (hetero)sexual than they really are. At one point, the two men exclaim, "What a time we had tonight," then grunt loudly while thrusting their pelvises toward the camera. Clearly, they are trying to overcompensate for some sort of lack of masculinity and/or hetero sexual experience through this hyperbolic display.

An interesting parallelism between Joe and Clarence occurs in this number that reinforces a homosexual reading of their relationship. Joe serves as the active agent of his part of song. "I begged her / I pleaded / I told her...I argued / I threatened / I said," he sings, the emphasis placed on his active sexual pursuit of the imaginary woman he supposedly picked up. Again, Joe is situated as every gay man's sailor fantasy, butch, aggressively confident, hyper-masculine. While Joe sings, Clarence acts out the part of the woman, feeling Joe's flexed bicep and exclaiming, "And he's got muscles, too!" When Clarence sings, however, he is the passive agent. "She begged me / She pleaded...She told me...She argued / She threatened / She said," he sings, creating an inverse of Joe's lyrics. Once again, Clarence is presented as the more effeminate icon of the gay sailor. Just as Clarence played the role of woman when Joe sang, Joe becomes Clarence's love interest when he sings, kneeling before him when Clarence sings "She pleaded." This inverting of lyrics and gender roles makes it appear as if the two men are singing about/to each other. When the song ends, the narrative cuts immediately to a shot of Joe passed out on a cot in his underwear. The shot widens to reveal Clarence rocking and humming "Brahm's Lullaby" by Joe's side, smiling. Narratively, Clarence has turned off Joe's alarm to prevent him from meeting up with Lola. The image, however, reads as voyeuristic, Clarence watching with pleasure as Joe rolls onto his stomach in nothing but his tight white boxers and undershirt. The very fact that Clarence prevents Joe from meeting Lola could also be read as an indicator of Clarence's jealousy of Joe's heterosexual relationships.

While a strong homoerotic undercurrent flows through this film, the narrative attempts to correct this threat of a move toward homosexual rather than heterosexual union by distancing Clarence from Joe during the last third of the film in order to facilitate Joe's coupling with Susie. In the middle of
the movie, Clarence disappears for three numbers (roughly ten minutes), drawing the focus of the film away from his relationship with Joe to Joe's pursuit of Susie. His absence is clearly intended to diffuse the threatening homosexual potential he represents and allow Joe to woo Susie. When one sailor is on screen, the other is absent. The narrative visually, spatially, and temporally separates the two men, abruptly severing their homosocial ties. In this way, the film replaces Clarence with Susie, Joe with the girl from Brooklyn. Just as Clarence needs to disappear for Joe and Susie to unite, Joe needs to be absent for Clarence's affection to be redirected toward his heterosexual pairing with the girl from Brooklyn. The girl from Brooklyn's appearance itself feels rather abrupt, particularly because of her character's one-dimensional quality. She has no name, no development. It feels as if she were inserted into the narrative just to exclude a possible homosexual reading of Clarence. This shift in Clarence from homosocial dependency on Joe to heterosexual attraction toward Brooklyn manifests in his mannerisms. He now wears his hat like Joe and even walks with more confidence, holding his head high and puffing up his chest. The sign that this remedy to homosexual potential is working is found in the scene when Joe and Clarence fall asleep together in Jose Iturbi's doorway. While physically close, the pairing can no longer be read as (homo)sexual because there is less physicality and touching involved on Clarence's part. Faced away from Joe, just leaning against him, no longer cradling him, Clarence's physical relationship to Joe has shifted now that Brooklyn is in his life.

Although the plot ends with the formation of two heterosexual couples and the narrative expulsion of homosexual potential and threat, the imagery of the final scene suggests this remedying of homosexuality is merely illusory and that the "threat" lingers still. The shot of Susan running to embrace and forgive Joe for deceiving her leads the viewer to expect the film to close on an image of heterosexual love and virtue. This embrace takes place in background, however. The foreground is crowded with sailors in tight white uniforms who all but obscure the picture of heterosexual bliss behind them. What should have been the visual consummation of Joe and Susan's heterosexual union becomes instead a subtle allusion to and reaffirmation of homosocial values. Moreover, the viewer never sees Susie make her debut as singer/actress. Instead, the sailors close the movie with a reprise of "Anchors Away," celebrating the homosocial values of joining the Navy. Rather than end with the heterosexual union influencing Susie's success in showbusiness, thereby resolving the main narrative conflict, the film ends with a homosocial number, rendering the goal of Altman's hetero-to-homo movement irrelevant. Finally, the framing of the final shot of the two couples draws more attention to the potential Joe-Clarence pairing than it does to the actual heterosexual couplings. Susie and Joe stand face-to-face; Clarence stands back-to-back with Joe, facing Brooklyn. The framing draws attention to the proximity
between Clarence and Joe, recalling the intimacy they displayed earlier in the film. If the director was concerned with diffusing homosexual subtext of their relationship, he should have placed the men on the outside to distance them from each other and to emphasize the presence of the women, the completers of the heterosexual coupling. There is even a moment of hesitation on the sailors' behalf when the women pull their respective men in for a kiss. Clarence and Joe look over their shoulders at each other and share a moment before turning back to women, suggesting that the homosocial ties can never be fully broken, the homosexual subtext never entirely remedied.

*Anchors Aweigh* serves as an example of the ways in which Altman's theory of the movement from homosocial to heterosexual couplings champions heteronormative values. If one takes the character of Clarence and his relationship with Joe into consideration, a reading of a potential move from *homosocial* to *homosexual* becomes evident. Although the narrative structure of the film as a whole adheres to Altman's prescribed trajectory—mismatched pairings leading to the final formation of the heterosexual couple(s)—the scenes and numbers shared between Clarence and Joe subvert this progress. By ending the film on a markedly homosocial note, Sidney, whether intentionally or unintentionally, reverses the flow of Altman's social-sexual pathway back toward homosocial and leaves ambiguous space for the interpretation of homosexual potentiality between Clarence and Joe.
Bibliography


