

Little Shop of Horrors A Study Guide

By Cameron Cox & Calee Gardner, dramaturgs

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Science Fiction as Social Commentary

A note by Cameron Cox, dramaturg

Though the title Little Shop of Horrors may suggest its genre is horror, it's not the type of horror you'd see in a movie theatre today.





What you are about to see follows the conventions of science fiction: a creature from another world, an imminent invasion, and a commentary on society. Since the genre's beginning in the early 19th century with

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* critiquing society's treatment of outsiders, science fiction has been used as a tool for social change.

Consider the world of Skid Row and how the truth can only be understood by incorporating elements of the fantastical or supernatural.

This trend continued into the 20th century in the form of popular dystopian novels such as Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451, George Orwell's 1984, and Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale. Additionally, science fiction was used in popular media such as Rod Sterling's The Twilight Zone, which addressed an array of contemporary issues,

or Marvel Comics's X-Men characters, developed by Stan Lee as a metaphor for the civil rights movement.







Science fiction allows us to see our world heightened in ways that we believe are possible and in ways that fantasy cannot. Aliens, monsters of our own making, current circumstances blinding us from bigger issues, and not realizing the stakes until it is too late are all trademarks of early science fiction/monster movies. Little Shop has all of these conventions with exciting twists happening on stage.

The lack of social mobility in Skid Row—where Mushnik's flower shop is located—creates an atmosphere where Audrey's wildest dream (expressed in "Somewhere That's Green") is not anything extravagant, but is simply a life in the suburbs. The other-worldly miracle solution Seymore finds in Audrey II not only seems like the easiest way to escape Skid Row, but the only way.

The Nuclear Fears of the 1950s and 1960s

Over the cityscape of the Skid Row set you'll notice a large clock counting down the hours until it is too late. This ominous image—tracking the seconds down till doom—is a popular motif in science fiction. But did you know that it has a real-world origin?

The doomsday clock was invented in 1947 by the Chicago Atomic Scientists (a group of researchers who worked on the creation of the first nuclear bomb used in World War II). Rather than telling time, the doomsday clock is a metaphor for the threats to humanity due to unchecked scientific and technological advances. The clock views a hypothetical man-made global catastrophe as midnight, and the minutes till midnight are measured by the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists.

The 1950s, the decade prior to the setting of *Little Shop* and the onset of the cold war, was defined by a nuclear arms race, with the doomsday clock wavering between 3 and 2 minutes to midnight for the entire decade.

"On the twenty-third day of the month of September, in an early year of a decade not too long before our own, the human race suddenly encountered a deadly threat to its very existence. And this terrifying enemy surfaced, as such enemies often do, in the seemingly most innocent and unlikely of places..."

-Little Shop of Horrors, Act 1, scene 1

As you watch the show, keep an eye on the clock. The original doomsday clock was counting down to the end of the world due to man-made nuclear disaster. What man-made disasters might this one be counting down to?

Little Shop as a Greek Tragedy

The opening narration of *Little Shop of Horrors* establishes that a catastrophe is on the horizon; but what brings that about?

Little Shop of Horrors, while featuring a modern genre, is a timeless story: man (hero) has problem; man searches for a miracle escape; man makes deal with a higher power; hero's weakness leads to tragedy. What makes Little Shop scariest isn't the fact that Seymore makes one huge mistake—it's that he makes dozens of well-intentioned wrong decisions until he feels he can't turn back. Similar to the hero of a Greek tragedy, Seymore's misguided actions determine his fate.

Greek Chorus: A chorus typically serving to formulate, express, and comment on the moral issue that is raised by the dramatic action or to express an emotion appropriate to each stage of the dramatic conflict.

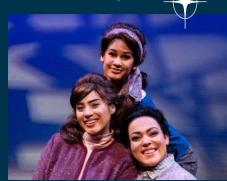


Another similarity *Little Shop* has to Greek tragedy is the role of the supernatural. It was common in Greek tragedy for the gods to meddle in the affairs of mortals, or for oracles to prophesy of imminent disaster. *Little Shop of Horrors* takes this idea and, through the lens of science fiction, replaces gods and oracles with a carnivorous plant from another planet.

These are not the only elements of Greek tragedy in *Little Shop of Horrors*. The popular convention of the Greek Chorus is embodied by the three singers, Crystal, Ronnette, and Chiffon. At times the ladies interact with the cast onstage; at other times you may find that they are speaking directly to you.



Pay attention to what the singers are saying when they speak directly to the audience. Their message is more than just lyrics set to music.



Girl Groups of the 1960s



The Crystals: In 1961, Barbara Alston, Mary Thomas, Dolores "Dee Dee" Kenniebrew, and Patricia "Patsy" Wright formed The Crystals with the help of Benny Wells, Alston's uncle. The Crystals are known for hits like "He's a Rebel," "Da Doo Ron Ron," and "Then He Kissed Me."



The Chiffons: The Chiffons originated as a trio of schoolmates: Judy Craig, Patricia Bennett, and Barbara Lee, later adding their 4th member, Sylvia Peterson. These Bronx locals were known for hits like, "He's So Fine," "One Fine Day," and "When The Boy's Happy."

Crystal, Ronnette, and Chiffon play a variety of different roles in the world of Skid Row. But did you know their names are based on actual New York City girl groups from the 1960s? These groups influenced the R&B, soul, pop, and doowop music our trio sings.



The Ronnettes: Sisters Veronica and Estelle Bennet and their cousin Nedra Talley formed this group in 1957. These Spanish Harlem natives were known for hits like "Be My Baby," "(The Best Part of) Breakin' Up," and "Walking in the Rain," all of which charted on the Billboard Hot 100.

Take a look at these images of famous girl groups, and see where you find homage paid to them in the work of costume designer Dennis Wright and hair-and-makeup designer Denyce Hawk.

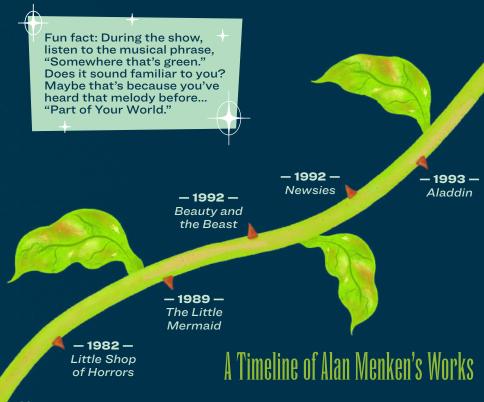
Alan Menken

With scores of animated musicals resurfacing from their VCR tombs, classic songs and musical scores make their way back into the limelight. A common linking theme? Their composer, Alan Menken. You probably know him from some of your favorite Disney tunes. But did you know his first big break was writing the music for Little Shop of Horrors?

Menken had been working with Howard Ashman on a less-than-successful musical, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*. Since both were feeling frustrated, Ashman turned to an old idea based on the film *The Little Shop of Horrors*. The story came together in about eight months.

The pair ended up collaborating with Martin Robinson, an actor and puppeteer for The Muppets. They added and subtracted from the original story's plot and created a whimsical show that got away with its dark content simply because it was handled as a joke. The musical performed to rave reviews and eventually an offer was made to move it from the smaller WPA Off-Broadway theater to the larger Orpheum Theater.

Peter Schneider was the company manager for *Little Shop*. Years later, he became the head of animation for Walt Disney. He hired Menken and Ashman to write *The Little Mermaid*, which revitalized Disney's animation department and led to the "Disney Renaissance" of the 1990s.





Scan this QR code to watch a video of the medley Alan Menken performed in BYU's Madsen Recital Hall.

> **– 2011 –** Tangled

— **1997** — The Hunchback of Notre Dame **– 2007 –** Enchanted

— 1996 — Pocahontas



Alan Menken Visits BYU

On March 8, 2018, eager BYU students packed the Madsen Recital Hall. Alan Menken, the composer of their childhood, presented a forum where he performed many of the classics of their childhood. Scan the QR code above to watch a video of the medley he performed. He shared scripted stories intermittently embellished with snippets of his music. Perhaps most impactful, however, was his Q & A with the student audience. He shared his opinions and advice with a room full of future performers, musicians, composers, and artists.

– 1998 – Hercules

"I could give you life advice or practical advice," he said. "They're the same, in a way. Life advice will keep you sane and going. The practical advice is to listen to people and don't get precious about your work. Be willing to work in any way possible—in collaboration, on your own, or standing on your head. Whatever it takes to get your work done, do it."

History of *Little Shop*

You might already be familiar with this show. The play enjoyed a wildly successful broadway review in 1981, and in just five short years a popular film adaptation was created. But did you know that the Menken and Ashman's *Little Shop of Horrors* that you will see tonight was not the first iteration of the story?



The original Little Shop of Horrors came out in 1961 (the year in which the musical takes place). While similar in many ways, this version had additional characters such as Seymore's ailing mother and a nosy detective investigating the shop. In this version of the story, the carnivorous plant's origin is explained by a dangerous and accidental cross mutation by Seymore, and Audrey II has the ability to hypnotize as well as to talk.

The 1961 film was shot in five days on a dare by director Roger Corman, who had a budget of \$15,000. It was recently included in a Festival of 100 Worst Films Ever Made.

Although it is popular today to adapt films to musicals, in 1981 it was much less common. The 1981 musical was groundbreaking not only for being an early example of a Broadway musical based on a film, but also for its extensive use of puppetry to bring Audrey II to life.

"The idea of doing a monster movie for the stage—not a horror movie, but a monster movie for the stage—the idea about doing something about a creature from another world, I don't think anyone's ever done that, certainly not as a musical."—Howard Ashman

In 1986, a second film adaptation of *Little Shop* of *Horrors* was released in theatres, taking the script from the Menken-Ashman musical and following it almost exactly. But after feedback from test audiences, some aspects of the story, particularly the ending, were revised for the theatrical release. So don't expect things on stage to end quite the same way as they did on screen.

The 1986 film also added a character, Arthur Denton—a patient of Orin's—who oddly enjoys oral surgery; the character was played by Bill Murray.

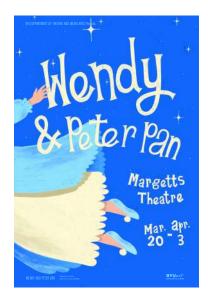


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