

THE EVOLUTION OF AMERICAN MUSICAL THEATRE: 1850-2020

By

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ABSTRACT

This is a brief overview of American musical theatre and its evolution from the 1850s through the 2020s. An analysis of each era includes defining physicality and vocality as well as notable composers, performers, and musicals. This project addresses historical and societal influences on the subject matter of musical theatre. I will show that contemporary musical theatre is an amalgamation of all that came before it.

Contemporary American musical theatre has come to be a rich, colorful world with a variety of genres and styles. This begs to ask the question: “How did Broadway go from *Showboat* to *Hamilton*?” In this paper, I will address the evolution of American musical theatre and its lesser-known beginnings. The roots of American musical theatre extend back to a handful of European nations in the 1850s with the rise of the European operetta. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines operetta as a (usually) romantic comic opera that includes songs and dancing. Think of operettas as a middle ground between a classical opera and more modern-day musicals. The European operetta has quite the backstory that begins with a French composer named Jacques Offenbach. After grappling with Napoleon III and the French government over his theatrical license which put strict boundaries on the composition and performance of his material, Offenbach responded with the best type of revenge. He wrote an operetta entitled *Orpheus in the Underworld* in 1858. In this wildly popular piece, Offenbach uses the Greek legend of Orpheus and Eurydice to satirize and critique the French government without overtly attacking Napoleon III (“Operetta”). The operetta was an international hit, gaining global recognition and spreading outside of France. By 1871, the renowned British duo of W.S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan teamed up and began writing their own comic operas. Inspired by Offenbach, the two composed satirical pieces with political commentary of the elites. This is a common theme throughout the Gilbert & Sullivan canon of operetta.

Operetta reached New York City in 1907 with the performance of *The Merry Widow* by Franz Lehár. Years before this, American composer Victor Herbert had begun composing his operettas that would premiere in the United States (“The Beginner’s Guide”). Operettas often examine the love lives of royalty. This era of the theatre was about romance, beauty, and splendor. Virtuosity and justice always prevail. Whether the operetta was a comedic satirical

piece or an exotic forbidden romance, the good-hearted hero always won. Since the subjects of operettas come almost entirely from the ruling class, the physicality of the performance should match that of nineteenth-century European royalty. For women, this means a straight spine with pristine posture. Women performed in corsets and full evening gowns, greatly limiting the movement of the actress. Any movements made must match those of a dignitary, demonstrating elegance and nobility. Given the name of the genre, one can safely assume an operatic vocal style. This is described as *bel canto* singing, which translates to “beautiful song/singing” in Italian. This means open vowels, early-onset vibrato, and use of the voice to convey emotion as the primary focus. A mid-Atlantic dialect is often employed. In addition to Jacques Offenbach and the team of Gilbert and Sullivan, popular composers of the time include Sigmund Romberg, Johann Strauss II, Franz Lehár, Rudolf Friml, and Victor Herbert.

Operetta began in the 1850s and served as one of the most popular forms of entertainment until 1914 with the beginning of World War I. There was a global shift in perspectives and the subject matter of European aristocratic frivolity didn't sit well with audiences anymore. This is when the next style of popular American musical theatre comes into play: musical comedy. This era begins in the 1900s and extends into the 1940s. The immigration of minority groups to the U.S. in the early 1900's played a major part in shaping the tastes of Broadway. New York was emerging as the hub of entertainment. One defining characteristic was the focus on the middle and working classes. Shows were about everyday people, rather than the exotic lives of elites in operetta. They contained elements of vaudeville, minstrel shows, burlesque shows, and revues. The tunes were catchy and playful with simple storylines. Nothing was meant to challenge the audience. These shows were a mixture of humor, sex appeal, and romance. The compositions were influenced by jazz and ragtime as well as military marching

bands. Think of a dance band model rather than a full orchestra. Speaking of dance, influences of Irish step dance, dances from the black community, and popular mainstream dances (like the Charleston) made their way into performances.

Amidst World War I, there was a revisiting of American ideals and a great sense of patriotism on the stage. If it wasn't about patriotism, romance was the center of the plot. Shows were now about young 20-somethings living everyday American lives. This was a result of a growing middle class in the U.S. and disappointment with the upper class and the government to maintain order and show up for those in need. As we move into the roaring '20s, the flapper archetype appears on stage as younger, more rebellious members of society begin pushing the envelope. With the depression of the '30s, productions had to be scaled down. Broadway begins to see more everyday, working-class stories of the American dream. Upstanding protagonists still reflected societal ideals of stable marriage and monogamy, but other characters brought heat and a new spice to the stage. Sex was still taboo, but flirtatious tunes and double entendre entered the arena.

Vocally, the sound of musical comedy was brighter and brassier. With more comedic pieces, the standard vocal style leaned more towards speak-singing, especially for comic roles. Performances emphasized personality over technique. As so, a smaller vocal range was necessary. Singers had to be loud to be heard over the band. Vibrato was present but slightly slower than that of operetta. It was much more important to catch all the lyrics than to produce a beautiful sound. Women wore shorter dresses, calling attention to their flirtatious female legs. Singers wore straight, short dresses that allowed for more dance and movement. The performer directly addressed the audience, so there was no 4th wall like we see for the most part today. The

staging was clear and included choreography. Gestures were made in an offering or pleading style with a symmetrical use of the hands.

Many composers, especially artists on Tin Pan Alley, defined the era. These artists included George M. Cohan, Jerome Kern, Irving Berlin, George and Ira Gershwin, Cole Porter, and Lorenz Hart. Some iconic performers from both popular music and the theatre include Al Jolson, Ethel Merman, Fred Astaire, Louis Armstrong, Eddie Cantor, and Bessie Smith. Popular shows of the era include the Princess Musicals, created by Jerome Kern, P.G. Wodehouse, and Guy Bolton. These shows ran from 1915-1918 in the Princess Theatre which seated less than 300 people (“Princess Theatre”). The setting was very American. Plots were simple and sets were made to suit the small space. Some of these titles include *Very Good Eddie*, *Oh, Boy!*, and *Oh, Lady! Lady!!*. You can deduce what the shows were all about by just referring to their titles. Non-Princess shows include *No, No, Nanette*, *Lady, Be Good*, *Babes in Arms*, *Crazy for You*, *Showboat*, and *Anything Goes*.

Now, theatre is moving into the golden age which loosely spans from the 1940s through the 1960s. American society is living in a post-World War 1, post-Depression era. The U.S. is involved in World War II from 1939 through 1945. The subject matter of musical comedy was no longer reflecting the hardships of a country engaged in the second World War. You can only go so far with emotional storytelling in the range of musical comedy. Audiences wanted something with more depth and more self-awareness. Though the values of golden age shows were still centered on romance, love was less about gaiety and fun and highlighted a return to morality, responsibility, and sense of duty as an upstanding American. The focus turned to the family unit and the community. The golden age of musical theatre can be described as an amalgamation of musical comedy and operetta, especially in a vocal sense. There were a handful

of groundbreaking innovations within golden age musicals. Now, the moral struggle is the central conflict of the show. This struggle takes precedence over the gags and laughs. Whereas musical comedy had its skepticism and hijinks, golden age musical drama had a greater sense of humanity and goodness. golden age shows integrate the book, music, and dance into a more cohesive vehicle for storytelling unlike ever before. The combination of song and dance became a plot device, rather than just performative, witty, toe-tapping tunes and showy moves. These elements reveal information about a character's wants and needs, like Laurie's dream ballet in *Oklahoma!* which was choreographed by Agnes De Mille. In this piece, we see Laurey's subconscious feelings and her struggle to pursue Curly or Jud. It's not just high kicks and skirt flips anymore.

Vocally, the music requires a greater range than musical comedy. There is a return to a more classical technique, but without the absolute formality and bel canto hallmarks of operetta. One can think of this as a mixture of the open vowels of operetta combined with the diction of musical comedy. Now, the quality of the voice will match the qualities of the characters. Returning to *Oklahoma!*, it is helpful to compare Ado Annie to Laurey. Ado Annie's voice conveys naivety, unawareness, and a lack of education, whereas Laurey's voice is meant to portray poise, dignity, and soft strength. The vibrato is still full and fluttery but has less rapidity than operetta. Rarely are there straight tones. The key is altering the approach to authentically tell the truths of the character. Another notable feature is the employment of the general American dialect. Some notable physical elements for women include a wider, more grounded stance. The position of the body is "relaxed, but alert" (Maslon, 280). This conveys an inner strength as well as a simplistic authenticity. Some notable shows include *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel*, *Brigadoon*, *The Pajama Game*, *The King and I*, *Damn Yankees*, and *South Pacific*. Notable

composing duos include Rodgers & Hammerstein, Lerner & Loewe, and Flaherty & Ahrens. Memorable performers of the era include Mary Martin, Alfred Drake, Barbara Cook, Gwen Verdon, and Yule Brynner. Now that dance plays a greater part in storytelling, distinguished choreographers emerge like Agnes De Mille, Jerome Robbins, Martha Graham, and Bob Fosse.

In the post-golden age years, the theatre continues to grow and evolve with greater complexity and uniqueness, making it less confined to specific models or boxes like the past eras. This means different styles of shows were existing at the same time. This makes it a little trickier to define the post-golden age era from the 1970s through the 2020s. It will make more sense to focus on a handful of new genres that emerged over the years since musical theatre branched off in many different directions post-golden age. The first genre to be examined is the rock musical.

With the Cold War, Civil Rights Movement, Vietnam War, political corruption, rise in drug use, and introduction of contraceptives came a significant rejection of old, imperial ideals. Women gain access to contraceptives, so the topic of sex becomes more mainstream and a new perspective/approach to sexuality arises in the media and musicals. We see more somber, gruesome themes emerge in shows like *Cabaret* (“The Surprising History”). Additionally, the elements of pop and rock music began making their way into the musical theatre scene. This, combined with attitudes of rebellion against the system, starts to define a new genre within musical theatre known as the rock musical. Again, with musicals growing more complex and innovative, shows begin to share elements of different genres rather than falling into one specific box. Composers are influenced by the music of the Beatles, Jimmy Hendrix, the Who. *Hair* is often considered the inaugural rock musical, followed by *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Godspell*, and *Pippin*. Later on, *Rent* and *Spring Awakening* become fan-favorites. Composers of rock musicals

include Galt Macdermot, Stephen Schwartz, Andrew Lloyd Webber, and the team of Schonberg and Boublil. The vocal style of this genre is more raw and edgy with varying elements based on the artistic influence. Vocal styles can range from growly and raspy to heavy use of glottal and belt mixing. The music is, more often than not, angry, aggressive, and somewhat desperate. Physically, actors are tasked with matching the emotional turmoil and fervor of rock performers. Posture is informal, sometimes sitting into one hip with a drooping head.

At the same time, there are other post-golden age styles, like the compositions of Stephen Sondheim. The works of Sondheim are in a class of their own. His work is characterized by actors speaking exactly what they're thinking. The subtext is conveyed through the lyrics, giving us a look into the character's exact thoughts and feelings. His compositions are incredibly complex and arguably the most difficult to play on the piano. Some of his most popular works include the musicals *Company*, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, *Sweeney Todd*, *Sunday in the Park with George*, *A Little Night Music*, *Merrily We Roll Along*, and *Into the Woods*. Alongside the works of Sondheim, we see shows like *A Chorus Line*, *Chicago*, and *Cabaret*. Choreographers like Michael Bennett and Bob Fosse continue to define musical theatre dance.

All of the aforementioned shows played sometime between the 1960'S-1990's and you can see why it's hard to put these musicals and composers into a box. For the sake of time and organization, it is best to enter the 21st century. 2000s pop music was defined by Britney Spears, the Backstreet Boys, and NSYNC so it's only appropriate to dive into the genre of "popsicals" (or pop musicals) and jukebox musicals. Similar to rock musicals, popsical pieces are heavily influenced by the trends and subjects of pop music. Through the composition, lyrics, or combination of both, these shows have a strong identity of recognizable mainstream music you'd

hear on the radio. This brings us to the jukebox musical: a musical in which the score is made up of pre-existing musical hits from a singular artist or group. The songs are woven into the script with characters and plot to produce an innovative new story. An important distinguishing feature between the popsical and the jukebox musical is that a popsical, while influenced by pop music, is still made up of original compositions written for storytelling whereas the jukebox musical takes advantage of already-successful songs then crafts them together with a book. Examples of popsicals with scores written by pop icons include *Aida* and *The Lion King* composed by Elton John as well as *Kinky Boots* by Cindi Lauper. The scores of popsicals aren't all composed by pop artists. Some just live in the world of an iconic pop era like *Sister Act* (which is considered to be pop-gospel-funk style) or *Memphis* which lives in the world of 1950's R&B. Now, back to the jukebox musical. There are three variations of the jukebox musical. The first of which is the biographical musical, like the ever-popular *Jersey Boys* which tells the story of the 4 Seasons. *Come Fly Away*, a musical featuring Frank Sinatra's hits is an example of the revue. The third is the most prominent form of jukebox musical is the book musical. Some popular examples include *Mamma Mia* with the music of Abba, *American Idiot* with the hits of Green Day, and *All Shook Up* with Elvis's chart-topping tunes. Since both the popsical and jukebox musical derive inspiration and material from recognizable styles and artists, the actor is faced with the challenge of entering the world and requirements of the specific musical in front of them. This means matching the physicality and vocal styles of the artists/musicians that inspired and/or created the works. Actors must do far more than mimicking or impersonating. They must bring a truthful life and backstory to the characters while appropriately matching the sound and look of the show. One way to accomplish this is to evaluate footage of the artists in performance. It can be helpful to latch on to some defining physicality that you can bring to your own performance. For

example, if an actor was singing “Backwoods Barbie” from the musical *9 to 5* with music by Dolly Parton and they were playing the role of Doralee, famously portrayed by Dolly herself in the original movie, they would need to do their homework. They’d mark her vibrato usage as well as the coloration of her vowels and accent, among other things. Megan Hilty does a phenomenal job of encapsulating this in her performance as Doralee on Broadway.

Broadway experienced great change in the 2000’s. Along with the terrors of 9/11 came the greatest commercial damage Broadway has ever seen. Five shows immediately closed in the weeks following the attacks and attendance in the months after was grim. An industry that relies so heavily on tourist attendance was understandably in deep trouble and needed help. Theatre in the 2000s saw an increase in corporate sponsorships and commercialism. In the ’90s the average ticket cost \$44. In 2019, the average ticket price was \$124 (Paulson 1). With more money at stake, producers had to be strategic to put up a sure-fire hit. Musicals became marked by celebrity appearances and blockbuster titles more than ever before. While these past 20 years can hardly be put into a box, a few of the noticeable themes and trends can be examined and briefly touched upon. The physical and vocal styles of these categories will vary greatly from show to show because of the sheer variety of material that has graced the Broadway stages. One major trend has been the revival. If something worked before, why not reboot it and do it again? This is not only a financially safe bet but sure to whip up nostalgia and support from original audiences. Some revivals of old hits include *Into the Woods*, *La cage Aux Folles*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Porgy and Bess*, *Anything Goes*, *Cabaret*, and *Chicago*. Another major trend has been the Disney musical. It’s got all the charm and wonderment of the Disney franchise with the ticket price of a modern Broadway show. These shows have been wildly popular, especially for non-theatre goers and tourists. A handful of Disney successes on Broadway include *The Lion King*, *The Little*

Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast, Mary Poppins, Newsies, and most recently *Frozen*. The most important part of acting in these shows is the adherence to the Disney industry standards. Think of the giant-eyed cartoon princess, the charming prince, and the seething villain. These characters are archetypal and distinguished.

An examination of 2000's Broadway musicals would be incomplete without mentioning shows like *Wicked, Mean Girls, Hamilton, Dear Evan Hansen, Phantom, Miss Saigon*, and *Avenue Q*. In a nutshell, some of the most popular composers with new works in the past 20 years include Lin Manuel Miranda of *Hamilton* and *In the Heights*, Benj Pasek and Justin Paul of *Dear Evan Hansen* and *Dog Fight* as well as the numerous works of Jason Robert Brown, Jeanine Tesori, and Alan Menken. It's complicated to wrap this up all with a bow, but that's what makes Broadway so beautiful and unique in the modern era. It's the mixture of past and present musicals, over-the-top show tunes, and simpler folk styles that define Broadway in the 21st century. The result of 170+ years of historical influences and new composers have contributed to the vast array of stories seen on stage today.

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