STRIKE UP THE BAND
Also by Scott Miller

From Assassins to West Side Story:
The Director’s Guide to Musical Theatre

Deconstructing Harold Hill:
The Insider’s Guide to Musical Theatre

Rebels with Applause:
Broadway’s Groundbreaking Musicals

Let the Sun Shine In:
The Genius of HAIR

In the Blood
a novel
To Joan Zobel and Don Miller, my parents, who ignited my love for musicals long before I can now remember, raising me on a healthy diet of *The Music Man, Carousel, Hello, Dolly!, Camelot,* and *My Fair Lady*; to the Muny in St. Louis, the amazing outdoor theatre where I was an usher for eight years and got an incomparable education in the literature of musical theatre; to Judy Rethwisch, my high school drama teacher, who cultivated my love of musicals and encouraged me to write my first musical; to Anne Dhu Shapiro and Peter Lieberson at Harvard, who took my passions seriously and taught me how to understand theatre music in depth; to my college roommate and fellow musical theatre lover David Flores for all those late nights deconstructing musicals; to Lisa Barnett, who decided to publish my first book on musicals and opened dozens of doors for me; and to Greg Redford, who emailed me one day and asked me where he could find a good musical theatre history book...
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The best musicals have everything the best plays have—great words, great characters, great emotions, great drama and comedy, timeless themes, universal truths. But musicals also have music. And no matter how you slice it, words alone can never have the dramatic power or intensity of emotion that music possesses. The great director and teacher Konstantin Stanislavski said that the abstract language of music is the only direct way to the human heart. And in this modern world where emotions—particularly big emotions—are often considered inappropriate, inconvenient, even impolite, where the expression of full-bodied emotion has been “civilized” out of most of us, the extreme, unapologetic emotionalism of musical theatre offers audiences a much needed release. Only in musical theatre can those big emotions be adequately expressed. Of course, it’s this emotionalism that makes some people, inculcated with a fear of emotion, so uncomfortable.

Martin Gottfried wrote in his book Broadway Musicals, “Ultimately, the Broadway musical is a metaphor for the ecstasy we are capable of creating and experiencing; it offers us an emotional orgasm. The Broadway musical is not a passive theater. Its audiences are transformed as they are being made love to.”

It’s fair to argue that no spoken monologue by itself could ever achieve the power of Sweeney’s “Epiphany” in Sweeney Todd, Floyd’s “How Glory Goes” in Floyd Collins, Edgar’s “Apology to a Cow” in Bat Boy, Collins’ eulogy for Angel in Rent, or, for that matter, the finales of Hair, Hedwig and the Angry Inch, Sunday in the Park with George, A New Brain, The Cradle Will Rock, Man of La Mancha, Company, or dozens of other musicals. Why is emotion so important in the theatre? Because emotion is what makes us human.

In the November 2003 issue of American Theatre, performance artist Tim Miller wrote:

As I watched the national Tony broadcast last June, savoring the folks singing and dancing their way through numbers from the nominated musicals, I was struck by how cheerfully utopian it all felt. These shows and the people who made them seemed to manifest a clear, alternative political vision of our country—one where
gay couples are smoochingly visible; where the short fat girl wins; where people of
different races boogie together; where progressive politics is everywhere you look.
The Tonys conjured up an America I wish actually existed.

It’s easy for people, even theatre people sometimes, to malign musicals as a kind
of guilty pleasure—superficial, reactionary fluff; a bad habit, like bingeing on bon-
bons. But I believe the legacy of the musical theatre is infinitely more complicated
and subversive and admirable.

Miller declared that musicals taught him everything he ever needed to know
about life, love, politics, and America itself. The musical theatre is America’s
mythology, a chronicle not just of America’s times, people, and events, but even
more of America’s dreams, legends, national mood, politics, and its extraordi-
nary muscle and resilience. As Ian Bradley writes in his book You’ve Got to Have
a Dream, “Is it escapism or is it rather their strangely spiritual, almost sacramental
quality which makes musicals deal in dreams, possibilities, and visions of what
might be if only we lived in a better world?”

Just like good plays, good musicals are about important issues, either on the
surface or in the subtext. Musical theatre isn’t some ancient, dusty, irrelevant
invalid; it is, right now, a thriving, vigorous art form that gives us an exciting
forum in which to talk about the issues of our world and to make sense of the
chaos of our lives. Just take a look at some of the really interesting shows of the
last decade: Songs for a New World (1995), Floyd Collins (1996), Bring in ’da Noise,
(1998), A New Brain (1998), Hedwig and the Angry Inch (1998), Bright Lights,
Big City (1999), Bat Boy (2001), Urinetown (2001), The Last Five Years (2002),
Avenue Q (2003), Hairspray (2003), The Light in the Piazza (2003), Caroline or
Change (2004), Spelling Bee (2005), and so many others—some of the most excit-
ing theatre we’ve seen in many years.

Perhaps part of why some people think musical theatre is dead is because
Broadway has become so commercialized that it’s nearly impossible for innova-
tive new work to get produced there. Stephen Sondheim’s last show, Bounce,
ever made it to New York. Only a few of the shows listed above made it to
Broadway. But dozens of brilliant new musicals are being produced around the
country in regional theatres every year, many of them too edgy and too honest
for Broadway. Musical theatre is more daring and more vigorous than ever, just
not necessarily on the Great White Way.

And then there are the older commentators and historians who claim musi-
cal theatre is dead because they wish musicals still looked like Carousel and My
Fair Lady, believing that the musical theatre should have stopped evolving
around 1964. They bemoan the conceptual work of Hal Prince, Bob Fosse, and
Tommy Tune; they whine about the use of microphones and the inferiority of
rock and pop music; they hate that this vigorous art form continues to evolve
and change in ever more surprising ways, leaving them and their dusty, vinyl
cast albums to the history books. But an art form can’t stand still, and any attempt to force it into stagnation is doomed.

In the December 2003 issue of American Theatre, director Molly Smith wrote, “The seriousness I embraced in dramatic form during my early career, I have now rediscovered—to my delight—in the content of musicals. For me, this robust, craggy art form is in the bones of American culture. It is unpretentious, earthy, forward-looking and optimistic. At the same time, it is full of conflict and contradiction.” She finished with, “As you can tell, I’ve been smitten by my rediscovery of this most robust of American art forms. Moreover I envision a future in which the American musical is the ‘serious’ theatre I so revered beginning in my twenties.”

Admittedly, there are some people who just don’t think serious issues have any place in musicals because they insist that musical theatre is such a silly and trivial art form. The anti-naturalism of characters breaking out into song is more than they can handle, so they just stay away from the “ridiculous” conventions of musicals altogether. You have to wonder if those people ever went to see any of the Star Wars movies.

What all these folks don’t understand is that all art is artificial. God makes lousy theatre, as the saying goes. Art makes order out of the chaos of the real world. Art arranges and edits real life so that it’s easier to see and understand certain moments and ideas. Musical theatre engages major political and social issues just as readily as any other form of art. Singing is just the language of musical theatre the way iambic pentameter is the language of Shakespeare, the way special effects are the language of sci-fi, fantasy, and horror films, the way paint is the language of Da Vinci, Monet, and Degas. The conventions of musical theatre are no more ridiculous than any other art form. Movies have romantic montages that telescope time. Many plays have narrators that speak directly to the audience. And have you ever known people in the real world who talk the way they do in a Neil Simon play, a David Mamet play, or a Woody Allen movie?

Some people also confuse realism with naturalism. Naturalism is a style of theatre or film in which everything feels as if it’s actually happening for the first time, like a documentary, a style in which people mumble, lines overlap each other, in which the artists try to imitate life exactly. Robert Altman makes naturalistic films like Nashville, Ready to Wear, and M*A*S*H. Realism, on the other hand, is not necessarily about style; it’s about content. Realistic plays and films are those that portray human life as it really is, no sugar coating, no ignoring of the darker, more complex side of things. George Furth and Stephen Sondheim’s Company—as unnaturalistic as a show can get—is also one of the most realistic musicals ever written because it deals honestly with the complexity, the difficulty, the messiness of human relationships. Its central character Robert doesn’t get a fully happy ending because people in the real world don’t get fully happy endings.
And then there’s the issue of the acting style. Because musical theatre generally (though not always) requires a bigger, broader, more expressive acting style, some people assume it’s also a less nuanced, less disciplined, less skilled kind of acting. On the contrary, to portray genuine emotions and subtle nuances within a broad style is one of the greatest challenges any actor can face. The acting required in a play without music often doesn’t compare in its complexity and difficulty with the acting required in shows like Bat Boy, March of the Falsettos, The Cradle Will Rock, Chicago, or Company. In fact, Bat Boy’s co-author and original director Keythe Farley coined a phrase that describes this challenge: “the height of expression, the depth of sincerity.” The canvas is bigger, the colors richer, the brushstrokes more expansive, but the image is no less true, the details no less real, the textures no less subtle. Many big-name “legitimate” actors have tanked in Broadway musicals because they were unable to walk the dangerous acting tightrope that musicals require. Acting well in a musical is a very special and very specialized talent that is often underappreciated and misunderstood. It’s tougher than it looks.

On the whole, musical theatre deserves more respect than it often gets and that’s the purpose of this book, to look in a new way at the continuing miracle of American musical theatre, at its evolution over the twentieth century, at the bold, outrageous—and quite often successful—experiments that have taken the form forward in giant leaps every decade or so. Modern American musical theatre is what opera composer Richard Wagner meant when he talked about Gesamtkunstwerk, a “total theatre” using all the art forms to create a powerful, unified work of art in an accessible, populist form. American musical theatre has grown as much in one century as other art forms have grown in several centuries. What other art form could have produced something as mature as Show Boat in the third decade of its existence? It’s as if the art form was born almost fully grown, as if it shot from infancy to adolescence overnight. And its success and its sophistication is due not only to the brilliant artists, some of them geniuses, who move the art form forward but also to the audiences who were—and still are—adventurous enough to embrace the experiments, to buy the tickets and encourage producers to keep trying new things. How else can one explain the hit status of Urinetown, Avenue Q, or The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee?

In fact, musical theatre—or musical comedy, as it was usually called up until the 1940s—is one of the few indigenous American art forms. Some scholars believe the only truly American art forms are musical comedy, comic books, the murder mystery, and jazz, all forms that have impacted nearly every corner of the civilized world. American musicals overshadow British musicals even in London, even though the British have contributed mightily to the art form over the years. In Germany and other parts of Europe, as well as in Japan, audiences give standing ovations to even the most run-of-the-mill American musicals simply because they are American. They just can’t get enough of that
Composer Leonard Bernstein once called musical theatre “an art that arises out of American roots, out of our speech, our tempo, our moral attitudes, our way of moving.”

But musicals aren’t just American. They are also political, some more wholly political like Assassins, Camelot, Cabaret, or Hair; some only partly so like Purlie, Li’l Abner, Finian’s Rainbow, Hairspray, or Ragtime; and some even subliminally political like Man of La Mancha, West Side Story, or The Rocky Horror Show. But once you look for politics, you find it everywhere. For instance, in Annie Get Your Gun, the fierce sexism of the plot and the songs “The Girl That I Marry” and “You Can’t Get a Man with a Gun” are disturbing enough from a modern perspective, but the idea that Annie has to lose on purpose in order to win Frank couldn’t be more abhorrent today. You might argue that we shouldn’t look at old shows through a modern lens, but it was a political choice to tell that story that way with that ending. It mirrored and reinforced the dominant view of gender in America. Kiss Me Kate swam in the same politics, juxtaposing a fictional, past, male-dominated world against a real world in which women were becoming increasingly uncontrollable. Both shows came at a time when America was trying to wedge women back into their old, prewar subservience. Just a couple years later, women in musicals would start to get stronger, in South Pacific, Guys and Dolls, The King and I, and a revival of Pal Joey, among others.

Political trends have been present in almost all musical theatre storytelling over the years. Casts became integrated as America became integrated. Female characters became overtly sexual (in shows like On the Town and Pal Joey) when American women became overtly sexual. Musical comedy morality became more ambiguous as mainstream American culture moved away from the certainties of traditional organized religion. Every choice made by writers, directors, and designers was political, and each choice either reinforced or challenged prevailing social and political values. No, No, Nanette was about wealth and its implications. Anything Goes was about American culture’s preoccupation with celebrity. Gentlemen Prefer Blondes was about America’s reinvigorated postwar hypermaterialism. It was all political, as well as a heck of a lot of fun.

Musical theatre had no precise beginning. Music was used in theatre by the classical Greeks and Romans, by Shakespeare, and by most other dramatists. Theatre had always used music; that’s all there was to it. It was only in the 1800s that the distinction emerged (and still survives today, unfortunately) between “legitimate” theatre and musical theatre. Up to that point, the idea of a piece of theatre without music was absurd, and audiences did not believe, as some do today, that theatre using music was less legitimate. They thought theatre without music was incomplete. And today, in a world in which our entire lives are set to music—car stereos, piped-in music in stores, streaming audio on the Internet, TV commercials, MTV and VH1, cell phone rings, iPods, families singing “Happy Birthday”—it seems even more unnatural now than ever before to have theatre without music. Human lives are musical.
And yet for the art form to get where it is now from where it was a century ago, lots of things had to happen. Audiences had to crave characters and plots in their musicals that reflected their real lives and issues; lyricists and bookwriters had to learn to write in the language of everyday people; composers had to learn to write in a style accessible to their audiences and to create original scores that didn’t just scavenge existing pop music or old, worn-out European traditions but actually offered up something fresh; and directors and actors had to discover the very American style of acting and staging we now recognize (even if unconsciously) as musical theatre—fast, brash, energetic, intense, emotional, and presentational.

Musical theatre as we define it today, the art form of Stephen Sondheim, Bob Fosse, Hal Prince, Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice, John Kander and Fred Ebb, Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein, was invented in America, it was largely developed in America, and in the estimation of many (perhaps biased) theatre people, it is still done best by Americans. There are British authors who declare categorically that the Brits invented musical theatre, but they’re talking about operetta, ballad opera, and other such things. There are German authors who will claim their country invented the form. But musical theatre as we know it today is a uniquely American art form, even though it is now often practiced by non-Americans. And it stands as a perfect metaphor for the melting pot heritage of America’s immigrant nation, with bits and pieces from almost everywhere, all coming together so completely melded, so fully integrated, that the result is something entirely original.

Musical comedy appeared on the scene around the turn of the last century. The musicals of George M. Cohan were like nothing anyone had ever seen before. They were not a mere evolution; they were genuinely new. A few history books will claim that The Black Crook in 1866 was the first musical, but don’t be fooled; it was just an accident that combined a bad play with a ballet troupe. It wasn’t a musical in any way we know it today. Some people try to trace musical theatre’s history back that far perhaps because they can’t believe it just appeared as suddenly as it did.

It is true that there were a few American shows in the late 1800s in which certain elements of musical comedy appeared in very early, protoplasmic form, shows like Evangeline (1874), The Brook (1879), A Trip to Chinatown (1890), In Town (1892), Clorindy (1898), and A Trip to Coontown (1898), but most of them wouldn’t be recognizable to today’s audiences as musicals. They were built on haphazard, mindless stories and used songs and dances entirely unconnected to the script. There was virtually no structure, no integration, no reason for the songs to be there and no reason for the audience to care. Even the most insubstantial of twentieth-century musicals would look Shakespearean next to these shows. In reality, musical comedy appeared on Broadway around 1900 (even though the label was invented a short while earlier), nearly unheralded, pretty much unprecedented.
Still, despite the stature they should enjoy, musicals have gotten the short end of the PR stick over the years. A definition of “musical comedy” didn’t appear in the highly respected Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians until 1980. Today, too many people have seen the older shows—Carousel, Show Boat, The King and I, The Music Man, Hello, Dolly!—done by schools or churches or community groups in which enthusiasm exceeds skill, in which the directors are lucky to get the show opened, much less communicate subtle nuances about character and relationships to their actors, most of whom have families and day jobs to contend with. And then there are directors who just don’t respect musical theatre, who butcher scripts and scores, who add jokes and comic schtick, cut songs, rewrite dialogue, add things from movie versions, things they’d never do to a play without music.

As a result, audiences sometimes see spirited but uninformed productions of complex shows like Carousel or The King and I or Chicago, the subtlety and depth of which get lost in the shuffle, and those audiences think the shows themselves are lacking. Or people see shows done by touring companies in three- or four-thousand-seat touring houses in which an audience member may well be three city blocks from the actors (an unfortunate economic necessity of the road) and there’s no hope of any real emotional connection, no hope of seeing subtle facial expressions, and no way for the actors to do any real acting that will still reach the upper balcony. Perhaps worst of all, people see lousy movie versions of shows like Carousel or Annie or A Chorus Line or the unfortunate television remake of The Music Man, assume they are accurate representations of their source material, and therefore assume the source material sucks.

This book is an attempt to right some of those wrongs. It is a tour of musical theatre history that presents not just what happened but, more important, why it matters. It’s arranged chronologically, not by Broadway opening dates but by when shows were created or first performed, even when that happens years before a show’s Broadway debut. The point of the chronology is to examine shows in context, to compare and contrast them with other contemporaneous work. It took years for Rent and other shows to reach full professional productions, but this survey looks at the historical and artistic context of the creation of important work. Likewise, this is a book about an art form, not geography, so the focus is not just on Broadway, but also off Broadway, off off Broadway, American regional theatre, and European theatre.

The list of shows discussed is an eclectic one, including shows many people have probably never heard of, even some that failed commercially but were important artistically, and shows that never made it to Broadway because they’re just too smart or too edgy for the tourist trade. The list leaves out many shows some people consider classics but that contributed nothing to the evolution of the art form. So don’t look for Brigadoon or The Sound of Music here—those are perfectly nice shows, but they played no part in the evolution of the musical theatre. There are plenty of hit musicals discussed—Cats, Hello, Dolly!, Cabaret,
Show Boat, My Fair Lady, Les Mis, Rent—but also plenty of shows you may never have heard of, like The Ballad of Little Mikey, Avenue X, Rainbow, The Nervous Set, and others. You’ll also encounter here many shows that get left out of other histories, shows by and about African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, women, gays, and people with disabilities, shows that had an impact on the art form and have been ignored in the past. The history of musical theatre is not just about white men (though they did dominate the art form for much of its history), it’s not just about America, and it’s really not just about Broadway.
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